

Men Behaving Badly

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Introduction: Or, Why I Wrote This Book and Why You Should Put It Down

Samuel, Eli, Saul, Jonathan, David, Amnon, Absalom...: they are a series of men doing men's things, being husbands and judges and sons and priests and prophets and fathers and shepherds and hunks and fighters and elders and kings and generals and giant-slayers and outlaws and princes and buddies and fugitives and deceivers and killers and poets and conquerors and guitarists and losers and adulterers and builders and seducers and rapists and brothers and failures and worshippers, and men who are about to die. Men do not have a monopoly on all these roles or positions or experiences, but historically they have dominated most of them. It is thus in regard to these roles and positions and experiences that they (we) have had to work out what it means to be human/men. I assume that these stories are there in scripture partly to give us resources in doing that. They do not tell us how to do it, but they tell us about the way God was involved with some men who were doing it.

A generation ago, we read stories about men as if they were just stories about people. But these are stories about men. Even when women feature, they are subordinate to men's lives. Some days, I want to subvert that and look for the women's angle, and one of my interests in *After Eating the Apricot* (Paternoster, 1996) was to see where I could discern the woman's angle in some Old Testament stories.

The last story I covered in that book was the one about 'Hannah and her sister', at the beginning of 1 Samuel. Subconsciously I was reflecting the

assumption that this is a turning point in the Old Testament. At the beginning of Israel's story, as happens at the beginning of the Christian story, women had some prominence alongside men in the way God worked and among the people whose stories needed telling. Arguably the greatest of the 'judges' in the Book of Judges, after all, is a woman. But as Israel grew up (!?), it became more patriarchal, as happened to the church. Hannah's story is by no means the last story about a powerful woman in the great narrative that runs from Genesis to 2 Kings. But when Israel makes the transition to being an institutional state, this narrative becomes even more predominantly a men's story.

As a man, I had learned a lot from thinking about those women's stories. As a simple Bible-believing Christian feminist, I was then not sure what to do with the stories about 'men behaving badly' (for the most part) that follow in 1 and 2 Samuel. Then as a simple Bible-believing Christian post-feminist I came to the obvious realization that they must have the potential to illumine what it means to be a man. So today I am going with the grain of the text itself, in mostly looking at the stories from the men's angle. That does not mean this is simply a book about masculinity or maleness. It does mean that I am interested in the way the stories talk about the pressures that come on a series of men, about the mistakes that characterize their lives, about the achievements they can rejoice in, and about the way God relates to all of those. Now that women can do most of the things that men can do, generally at the same time, they may also need to discover what it means to be women/human in regard to these. Perhaps these stories can help them to do so (if mostly by revealing messes it is possible to get into), as well as help them understand men if they should want to do that.

When someone writes history or tells a story, at least three concerns may interweave. These are plot, character, and theme. The plot is where the story as a whole goes, and how it goes there. It requires a beginning and an end, a problem to be solved or a situation to be explained. The material between beginning and end traces the circuitous route of events on their way from the one to the other. The characters are the people involved in this journey, though it may be that none of these characters lives through or is present through the whole. Then the theme or themes are the recurrent issues that the story raises.

It differs from story to story whether plot or character or theme is more important. By its nature theology assumes that *theme* is what matters: theology is the attempt to systematize material on various themes. It is often said that the Bible story itself is most interested in *plot*. It is the story of how God set the world going and then stayed involved with it in order to restore it and take it to its destiny. In 1 and 2 Samuel, too, the plot is especially important. This narrative is part of the story of Israel. In particular the books are an account of how Israel made the unexpected transition from a people led by people such as Moses and Joshua and the leaders called 'judges' to a state ruled by kings to whom God had made a permanent commitment. The major *theme* of the books is related to that. These books are a study of the nature of leadership, of the leadership God approves and does not, of ways in which God relates to human leaders, of leadership that works and does not, of what leadership does to people who want it and who do not want it, to the led and to the leaders.

But 1 and 2 Samuel are also books rich in *character* study, more rich than any other book in the Old Testament: Samuel, Eli, Saul, Jonathan, David, Amnon, Absalom.... And character is what grabs the touchy-feely era in which we live. We want to know what makes people tick. So in focusing on character in this book, I am colluding with that interest of ours. Here I issue a health warning or disclaimer like the ones at the beginning of television programmes that warn you that this film may disturb sensitive viewers. This book may pander to sensitive viewers and may mislead them about the nature of 1 and 2 Samuel.

In focusing on the books' characters, we are concentrating on but one aspect of the books, and it is not one that the books see as all-important. While character is more important in these books than in others, it is still subordinate to plot, as is the case in the Bible story as a whole. We will find that some of our questions about the way God deals with individuals in 1 and 2 Samuel do not yield satisfactory answers, and one of the reasons is that the story's focus does not lie here. It gives us only a partial picture because its concern lies somewhere else, with the place of these people and these events in the broader story of what God is doing with Israel.

David Jobling opens his book on *1 Samuel* by telling us how he has lived with 1 Samuel for twenty years. His book shows that this has been a rich experience, but it has not resulted in his reckoning that he now has all the answers to the significance of 1 Samuel. Indeed, he has more questions than he had twenty years ago. That reflects something of the nature of this story. And thus sometimes in the pages that follow I will raise a question about why someone did this or that, or why God did this or that, and acknowledge that I do not know the answer, because the story does not seem to give it.

In a famous New Testament passage, 2 Timothy 3:15-17 gives us some description of the nature of the Old Testament and of its significance for us. It tells us about the purpose of 'the sacred writings'. This means the Old Testament, because the New does not yet exist, though no doubt the description can also be applied to it. The Old Testament books are meant to teach us about the nature of the salvation that we have in Christ. To that end they are God-breathed writings, or (as I rather think it should be understood) they are writings produced as a result of people being blown over by God. They are therefore useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, and thus to take us on towards being well-equipped to live for God.

Christians make some assumptions about what must be the implications of all that, about what sort of book the Old Testament must be. Generally they have no need to test these assumptions because they do not read it. If they do, they may find themselves in crisis. At least, this happens to some of my students when I send them off to read the Old Testament books. They do not look like the kind of books they expected 'sacred writings' to be. Readers may then have one of several reactions. They may turn the Old Testament into the kind of book they expected, by reinterpreting the tricky bits and reading it through rose-tinted spectacles. Or they may decide that 2 Timothy 3:15-17 cannot be quite right: the Bible is not inspired after all, or not all of it.

The alternative response I commend to people is to accept this experience of discovering what the Old Testament is actually like and to let it change our idea of what it means for something to be 'inspired'. I do not mean that it has mistakes in it. I believe that nothing is there by mistake. 1 and 2 Samuel, for instance, raise all sorts of questions about what makes human beings tick and about how God relates to them, and do not always give clear answers to these questions. Let us try the possibility that this is not because the Holy Spirit had an off day or could not overcome the shortcomings of their writers. It is because stories of this nature would actually contribute to our maturing in Christ.

It means that one of the things that God does in order to take us to maturity in Christ is to make us wrestle with questions. Indeed, in life in general we know that this process of wrestling is one of the things that take us to maturity. For some reason we sometimes assume that the Bible could do that simply by giving us straight answers and not by making us think about questions. But the ambiguity and allusiveness in these stories is something God is happy about, not something God wrings hands over. The stories leave us wrestling with what was in Saul's heart or David's. But we do not in the end need to know what was in Saul's or David's heart. We need to know what is in our own. And

wrestling with questions may help us more to discover that than being told what was the answer for Saul or David.

Which takes me to another feature of these stories that we may find surprising. My title presupposes that most of characters are people of some moral and personal ambiguity.

There are two sorts of films and novels and two sorts of Christian biography. There is the kind that tells of heroes and heroines of unsullied honour and unwavering faithfulness, who go through danger and loss but find that things all work out OK in the end. And there is the kind that tells of people with deep flaws who pay a price for making fearful mistakes, or even pay a fearful price for making small mistakes. I imagine that this implies that there are two sorts of human beings, people who are inspired by the first kind of story and people who are inspired by the second kind. And this would fit with the fact that scripture offers us something of both.

The stories of the saints suggest that the church has usually emphasized the first kind of inspiration, and this has also shaped the church's reading of scripture. A few years ago the Israeli government was almost brought down by a remark of a senior government minister who commented that he did not personally approve of everything that David ever did. David is one of Israel's great heroes. How dare a mere 1990s politician criticize the great King David? People who asked the question showed that they had not read the story lately, or that they remembered the story through rose-tinted spectacles. The story of David, and the rest of 1 and 2 Samuel, is a narrative of men (and women) with deep flaws who pay a price for making fearful mistakes, or even pay a fearful price for making small mistakes. Their stories tend not to have very happy endings. If you do not think you want to know that yet, you had better take this book back to the bookstore.

But I will comment from time to time on the way in which their stories are set in a wider narrative that God guarantees will have a happy ending. It is that fact, among others, that makes it possible to face the unhappy endings.

1

The Man Born to Be Tough (1 Samuel 1-3)

It is odd, really, to begin a book about 'Men Behaving Badly' with Samuel. When a research student a few years ago looked for the way Old Testament heroes are portrayed 'warts and all', he could include Moses and Elijah and Elisha, but not Samuel. There are no moral skeletons in his cupboard, at least none to which the books named after him offer the key. In Samuel's story the men behaving badly are the people he has to work with, the people who are a disappointment: his natural father, his adopted father, his adopted brothers, his sons, his people as a whole, and the two kings he appointed. When he challenges people to find fault with his life in his old age (1 Samuel 12:2-5), no one can do so.

Yet this does not make Samuel an easy guy. I suspect I would have found the more ambiguous, less austere characters easier company. Ancient saints and modern saints (lifelong missionaries and the like) seem sometimes to have been austere like that. It is their toughness that has made it possible for God to use them. But it also gives someone like Samuel a certain ambiguity after all.

An Averagely Dysfunctional Family

Perhaps being separated from his mother at an early age shaped Samuel, though the family into which he was actually born was an averagely dysfunctional one.

Many modern Western children grow up in a family where mother and/or father marries more than once, so that these children may call more than one person mother or father and may grow up with a number of full siblings and a number of half-siblings. In Israel that might also happen, as the result of a man having two wives at the same time rather than successively, but some of the dynamics will have been similar.

There might be several reasons why a man had more than one wife. The conviction that every woman ought to be under the protection of some man, combined with periodic imbalance of numbers between the sexes, might mean that some men had to take on more than one woman. The preceding stories in the Old Testament, at the end of Judges (in the Hebrew Bible Ruth comes elsewhere), tell of thousands of Israelite men getting killed in battles, not least in the area where Samuel's family lived, and that would mean an imbalance of that kind. The assumption that women were men's property ('Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?') might mean that a man married several women as a sign of status (nowadays they buy several houses and cars). David and Solomon take this to its logical extreme, though their stories also show how women are used as pawns in the political game (the film *Elizabeth* reflects how that has usually been so through history). The assumption that women are important in order to bear children might mean that a man took on another woman if his first wife could not have children. Abraham illustrates this process, and it seems likely that Samuel's father does, too.

Elkanah was a man who knew who he was. He could trace his line back four generations. But he was torn between two women, and it seems unlikely that he understood them. He loved Hannah. Presumably the match had been arranged by their parents. But perhaps Elkanah had got to know Hannah and fallen in love with her already, in the manner of the couple in the Song of Songs, and maybe then they had to manipulate the parents into letting them marry, like Samson with his Philistine wife. Or perhaps their parents had done their own work well and Elkanah had fallen in love with Hannah after they married, like Isaac with Rebekah.

But a year passed, and another, and no baby arrived. And maybe it was this that led Elkanah to marry Peninnah, too (I understand that when a couple cannot have children, it is as likely to be the man's problem as the woman's, but the Old Testament tells no stories about sterile men). What else is a man to do? Who is to work on the farm as Elkanah grows older, and to look after him and Hannah, and eventually to inherit the farm? So he marries Peninnah, too, and Peninnah can do what is required of a woman. She has a functioning womb. Elkanah only has to look at her and she gets pregnant.

It requires little imagination to hypothesize the dynamics of this household. There is a man torn between two women. One is the love of his life. The other he no doubt also loves in some sense. To judge from what happens when men have affairs in modern cultures, men have no problem in principle with loving two women. But she knows that she is not the love of his life. If the narrator of this story knows that Elkanah loved Hannah, presumably Peninnah did, too.

But when you bring the children in, positions are inverted. Peninnah is the wife with a functioning womb, an awesomely fecund one. There is the baby at her breast and the toddler holding onto her skirts and the child playing outside the house and the growing girl on her way back home with water from the well and the growing boy sitting on his own under a tree the other side of the courtyard carving at a piece of wood, and they all love her, and she dotes on them. And she thus lives in a circle of love that half-makes up for the fact that Elkanah's first affection goes elsewhere.

Every year they all went to the festival at the cathedral, and it was another reminder that another year of Hannah's barrenness had passed, and most years were also another reminder that Peninnah had this fecund womb. Yet another child had been born. She has no need to say anything in order make Hannah feel

a failure, to feel less than a woman, to feel that love is all very well but that it hardly makes up for having a closed womb. The fact that there was no need to say anything did not mean she said nothing, of course. After all, that circle of love with her children only half-makes up for not being her husband's first love.

I imagine Elkanah lying awake at night (how do you sleep with two women - I mean literally 'sleep'? For that matter, how do you sleep with one of them in the metaphorical sense, in a little Israelite house? How do you feel and how does each of them feel knowing how sounds and movements carry?). I imagine him wondering how long he can live with this, or how he can live with it better.

Or perhaps he does not wonder, for he is a man, and the signs are he is your average not-very-sensitive guy. As I have suggested, he hardly succeeded in keeping from Peninnah that she was mainly valued as a womb. And the way he handled Hannah, with her feelings about her closed womb, hardly suggests he had paid attention to the counselling classes at the high place. 'Why are you so downhearted? Aren't I worth more than ten sons?' So make her feel guilty as well as depressed, Elkanah. Later there is the moment when Hannah suggests/insists that she should not go to the festival but wait until the moment she will take Samuel and leave him there. 'As you wish', says Elkanah, shaking his head at the incomprehensible ways of a woman's mind.

But perhaps there was also a pain in his heart, a wistful recollection of those days when it was like the Song of Songs. Perhaps he remembered the way he had not minded when she didn't get pregnant in the first five minutes of their marriage. But perhaps he also remembered the way she had changed and turned in on herself as the years of months had passed with the manner of woman coming on her when she so wished it would not. Perhaps when he lay awake at night he wished he had never thought of Peninnah (or was it Hannah's idea, following Sarah's example?). Perhaps he wished for that despite all the joy and security his children brought him and despite the reassurance that came from its being clearly not his manliness that was the problem. Perhaps he wished they had had the courage to stick it out with childlessness and not worry about old age and what happened to the farm, and had had the courage to give the lie to the idea that you were somehow incomplete if you did not have children.

From One Dysfunctional Family to Another

Perhaps at least he came to wish that they had tried prayer earlier. They seem to have been a model religious family. Year by year they were at the great festival there at Shiloh at harvest time. There they looked back over God's provision during the past year and prayed for the rains that would make next year's ploughing possible. There they remembered the covenant that God had made with them and reaffirmed their commitment to God. Being a religious family does not stop you being a dysfunctional one (or vice versa). It may even help. Think of a few clergy families you know.

The year after Samuel's birth, Elkanah kept his own promise to God, though we do not know anything else about the individual religious life of Elkanah or Peninnah. We know about Samuel's mother's. First, she was a woman who knew how to pray. Apparently it took her some years to get to pray about her closed womb, but she got there in the end. It is never too late to realize that you can pray about a thing. And Hannah was the sort of woman who went in with all guns blazing. I have the impression that Elkanah was a bit of a wimp, but there may be room for only one tough cookie in a marriage. Once Hannah committed herself to something, you could expect to see sparks fly. Woe betide any misguided pastor who got in her way. She also knew that tears are one of a woman's most powerful weapons, and that they work with God as well as anyone. Furthermore, she knew that God cannot resist a promise.

So Samuel was born as an answer to prayer. His name is something of a mystery. The last syllable is the word for God that appears in names such as Israel or Ishmael. Indeed, if we had been told that his name had the same meaning as Ishmael, 'God hears', it would have been as plausible as many interpretations of biblical names. When Hannah says that she called him Samuel because she had 'asked' Yahweh for him, we might be tempted to reckon that it was Hebrew lessons that she had been skipping while Elkanah was skipping Counselling. 'Asked-for' sounds like an interpretation of the name Saul, not Samuel. Indeed, Saul's name has been lurking under the surface of this story all the way through, every time it refers to Hannah asking or lending (another aspect of the usage of the same verb, because lending is usually a response to asking): see 1:17, 20, 27, 28; 2:20. The very form of the name 'Saul' itself comes in 1:28: 'as long as he lives he is *sha'ul* to Yahweh'.

That links with the psalm of thanksgiving that this powerful woman prays when she makes her solo visit to the cathedral with Samuel (2:1-10). It is the visit she had wanted to make on her own, not with the family. There was something private going on between her and God over this child. Biblical critics rightly note that her psalm is not the kind of prayer you would expect a mother to pray on such an occasion, and suggest that it was put on Hannah's lips by the author of 1 Samuel. But this author was at least as clever as us biblical critics, and could therefore have devised a psalm that more matched what a mother might be expected to say on such an occasion. The psalm that Hannah actually prays is a prophecy, like her comment on Samuel's name. Metaphorically, the child to whom she has given birth is Israel's first king. He will be the means of bringing about great reversals in Israel's fortunes, though he will also be the victim of such a reversal in due course, and this feisty woman knows it.

Indeed, there is more to it than that. Samuel will be the means of anointing not only Saul but also David. These are indeed books called '1 and 2 Samuel'. Without him, the books would be impossible. And his mother's psalm paints a far-reaching portrait of the capacity of Yahweh, Israel's Rock, to bring about reversal, and this portrait suggests not merely the limited achievements of Saul but the much more far-reaching achievements of David. If it were possible to have prophecy in your genes, then Samuel has it. Like Jesus, he is his mother's son, all right.

'A sword will pierce your soul, too', Mary was told when her son was born. She too is a tough cookie, but that does not mean you lack a woman's feelings about the son of your womb, especially if he is miracle-born.

You could breast-feed a child for two or three years in the middle east, and maybe another reason for Hannah's delaying that visit to the cathedral is to make the very most of the years she could have the child as her own. There was no giving up this baby at birth to make the adoption process as painless as possible. But she has no intent to renege on her promise, and eventually she and Elkanah make their joint pilgrimage. He was just a child, the narrator comments. Goodness knows what went through the minds of father and mother. The story is reminiscent of that terrible account of Abraham taking the young Isaac on such a journey, one whose significance was only too clearly known to Abraham but was a mystery to Isaac. Indeed, as far as we know it was a mystery to Sarah, who according to a Jewish elaboration of the story dies of shock when she learns about it. Hannah and Elkanah, too, were on their way to a sacrifice. They took a bullock and an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, partly to have their special feast at the cathedral, partly as a gift to its staff to make up for giving them another mouth to feed. One also wonders whether this is the externalization of the sacrifice mother and son are making.

For who exactly is to be the new family for this little boy? It is the considerably more dysfunctional one that we will look at further in chapter 2. His new father is the old priest Eli, whose references as a father would be unlikely to satisfy the social workers considering this adoption case. His

opinions regarding the arrival of this mad woman who wants to dump her baby on his doorstep are unrecorded, and he has almost forgotten how to go about being a priest (1:13-17). Samuel's adoptive brothers are Hophni and Phinehas, whose mentoring of anyone regarding work at the cathedral seems unlikely to provide him with good models. His adoptive mothers are presumably the women with whom Hophni and Phinehas are sexually involved. Being sent off to boarding school when you are three and told to play the man is all very well. This is something else.

I am not sure whether the dysfunctional state of the rest of the society makes all this easier or whether it increases the stakes. It was a society characterized by self-indulgence (1:14), one that was led religiously by people who only cared for self-indulgence (2:12-17, 22), a society God seemed to have abandoned (3:1). This story carries on from the distasteful ones in Judges with their explanatory refrain, with which the book closes, 'In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit'.

And I imagine being a miracle-child lays a burden on you, even without the further burden of being committed to God by your mother, even without that terrible loss of having your mother abandon you to this place you have never seen before and to these people you have never seen before. Further, maybe you can sense that the menage leaves something to be desired, even by the standards of Ramathaim. I have virtually no memories of my early childhood, even (especially?) of the day when I (allegedly) ran away from home just after my sister was born and had to be chased through a stream by my Auntie Gladys. Sean Lennon tells of his vivid and precious memories of the first years of his life before his father was shot. He has held onto those memories fiercely. I imagine Samuel did the same.

Just once a year his birth family would make the trek to Shiloh. Ramathaim ('Twin Heights') is apparently also referred to as Ramah ('Height'; see 2:11), and that is the name of several places in the area to the north or northwest of Jerusalem. None is more than fifteen or twenty miles from Shiloh. I find it difficult to imagine that Hannah resisted the temptation to walk there for the day from time to time, unless she was also the kind of tough cookie who thinks it is best to cut off ties sharply when a relationship cannot develop in a natural way. But perhaps a woman could hardly make that journey on her own, and in any case Hannah herself spent the best part of the next decade pregnant or nursing (she had other children, but I don't know whether they made it easier to forget her miracle baby). So perhaps the annual family visit was the one occasion when mother and son met, and each year she would take clothes she had made for him. How much love and gratitude and grief and commitment and joy and sadness was sown into those clothes?

A Non-averagely Functional Individual

As a person, morally and religiously Samuel towered above his whole generation, let alone the likes of his birth family and his adoptive family. He is a man of super-human stature, and this is one of the reasons for his seeming to be austere. Very impressive people can seem to belong to another species. Hannah is the only person over whom he does not tower, yet we can relate to her because she comes across as a human being with pains and griefs. Samuel's are hidden, unless they come out in the toughness of the way he treats someone like Saul who is in a sense theologically the reason for all Samuel goes through.

Samuel stood out from the beginning. Here is this newly-weaned boy, who might thus be two or three years old. At the end of 1 Samuel 1 he is taken on that awesome visit to the cathedral. It is a visit for his parents, but not for him. They buy him only a one-way ticket. There he is passed over from one father to another - or rather from an earthly mother to a heavenly Father. In

the last sentence of the chapter he becomes the subject of a verb for the first time in his story. And the verb is 'he worshipped' (1:28).

Many of the modern English translations cannot believe their eyes, so they briskly rewrite or reinterpret the text. That comment may be a little unfair, though not much. Manuscripts vary considerably over the details of the text of 1 Samuel and translations do have to puzzle over the text at many points. The RSV had three shots at reworking the text. The first edition had all the family worshipping, the NRSV leaves out the worship and has Hannah leaving Samuel there for Yahweh, rather like the postman leaving a parcel when you are out, while the NRSV margin assures us that what the Hebrew means is that Elkanah worshipped. One of the commentators tells us that actually it was Eli who was worshipping. Now the idea of Eli worshipping in response to this event is a neat one, but it is a sudden transition, while Elkanah has not been mentioned for a long time. Samuel is the 'he' in the context. And a statement that little Samuel worshipped is of a piece with where the story will lead. It provides another basis for the song of praise that Hannah then sings. The little boy's response to being in the presence of Yahweh is more evidence that Yahweh is doing something spectacular to put Israel's life right and to put its destiny in order.

And it is of a piece with what follows. Elkanah goes home (2:11). It is an odd comment, for presumably Hannah went home, too. She is at home sewing for Samuel a bit later. One effect of mentioning only Elkanah is to draw a contrast with Hannah. She prays this tumultuous song of praise, this prophetic recognition of the turning upside down that Yahweh is effecting in Israel's life by means of this miracle-baby. Meanwhile Elkanah packs his bags to go home. Another effect is to remind us that this is a patriarchal story. It was Elkanah who used to go up to the festival (1:3). His family can be taken for granted. It is Elkanah who goes home from this sacrifice. His wife can be taken for granted. Hannah has had her moment of glory. The patriarchal curtains are closing on Hannah, as they do in biblical stories, where God breaks the mold for a while but the old ways have a way of reasserting themselves. From now on Hannah gets back to women's work such as needlework and ordinary pregnancy.

So the father goes home, while the son (in the second statement to be made about him) took up the ongoing task of 'serving' Yahweh. It is what priests or Levites do, or ministers of state in a secular context. He was 'a boy, wearing a linen ephod' (2:18): a boy in a priest's garment, but just playing a game. He grew up 'with Yahweh' (2:21), the way an ordinary child grows up 'with' parents or siblings. And as he kept growing, he looked good to Yahweh and to other people (2:26). He looked good to Yahweh like the creation that God examined and liked the look of. He looked good to other people - his mentor and the other members of the cathedral staff and the worshippers who came there. He is an impressive young man, with clear potential for giving Shiloh Cathedral a new start. The scene is set.

Another Father

To judge from the way the story is told, Hannah did not think too much about Samuel's adoptive family. She is not giving him to them, but to Yahweh. He is not going to live with them, but with Yahweh. Hannah puts the point in a striking way. Literally, he is going to 'appear with Yahweh's face' (1:22), to grow up 'with Yahweh' (2:21). If things had been different, she would have made sure that he lived his life with his mother watching over it. She entrusts him to Yahweh in the conviction that Yahweh will now do the watching. Perhaps the austere side to Samuel reflects the tough side to his early experiences. We never hear of him relating to anyone closely and hardly ever of his having any

emotions. But the story both says that Yahweh does the watching, and shows this is true by the results.

That background in a transaction between Yahweh and Hannah surely casts a protective and a solemn shadow over young Samuel's life. There is a burdensome side as well as a positive side to being the child of famous parents (Sean Lennon speaks of that, too). How much more is that the case when your mother has promised that you will always belong to God and that you will live with the odd disciplines of that (1:11)? You were born as an answer to prayer and your life resulted from a deliberate mental act on God's part (1:19). But then, perhaps that is true of the life of each of us. Your mother sees you as a kind of symbol or promise of God's power to deliver and defeat, to kill and enliven, to raise and humiliate, to protect and silence, to shatter and strengthen (2:1-10). That casts a shadow before you, announcing your destiny.

The same is true of the words of another strange visitor to the cathedral when Samuel is growing up. A man of God comes to see Eli (2:27-36). When the Old Testament talks about a man of God, it does not so much mean a man of special religious devotion, though the man might well be that. It means a man of mystery, a man who brings some unexpected supernatural event or word from God. To add to the mystery, this man is not named. We do not know where he came from, or where he went, or what he did with the rest of his life. Only this one word counts. It reminds Eli of the way God chose his family to be the priestly line and asks why the present generation is abusing its position. Like many of our 'Why' questions, 'Why' questions in the Bible are usually protests rather than requests for information. It asserts that a promise of God's commitment does not stand if it meets with no response, and it declares 'Those who honour me I will honour.' It is a principle that will burn itself into Samuel's spirit and undergird his ministry. Further, the mystery voice announces that Yahweh will appoint a priest who will be faithful, who will see things Yahweh's way and exercise his ministry Yahweh's way, and to whom Yahweh will make a sure commitment.

One would assume this was Samuel. Actually God has something different in mind for him.

You do not need a story like the one of Samuel's birth in order to become a priest, the ministry his mother dedicates him for. But there is no way of dedicating him for the ministry he will end up in, partly because this ministry has not been invented. The story of Samuel's birth is like the story of the birth of a one of Israel's out-of-the-ordinary leaders like Moses or Samson, and he does function as a 'judge'. Indeed, if this story had set him on the way to being king (if it had been Saul's story), we would not have been surprised. But the next episode in his story sets him on a different career track.

In those days the word of Yahweh was 'rare' (3:1). That is a considerable understatement. Until the arrival of that 'man of God' in the previous chapter, Yahweh had been keeping quiet since the days of Joshua two centuries before. To prove the rule, at the beginning of the Book of Judges there is one angel who speaks Yahweh's words, and then a terrorist called Ehud who tells the king of Moab that he had a word from Yahweh for him, consisting in a dagger. Yahweh's word had been rare, all right.

More literally the word of Yahweh was 'precious'. In the circumstances, it would be. People no doubt treasured memories of the days when Yahweh spoke to Moses and Joshua. That was the old days. But what about that promise that God would give the people a prophet who would bring God's word to them as Moses had (Deuteronomy 18:14-19)? And nowadays neither were visions 'widespread'. We have noted how the last part of Judges has periodically commented on the religious, social, and political disorder of its day, observing that 'there was no king in Israel' and that 'everyone did what they saw fit'. The absence of prophetic word or vision is another cause and/or effect and/or sign of a breakdown in what it meant to be Israel.

It is part of the background to what follows. Eli is old and he cannot see very well. It is literally true, but metaphorically so, too, though the fact that Yahweh has not been speaking much may mean that Eli cannot be blamed too much for being slow to recognize when Yahweh issues a summons to someone. When Yahweh addresses Samuel, Samuel has no more idea what is going on. I have suggested that the story will give a rather solemn impression of the austere Samuel. For someone reading the story backwards, or reading it for the second time, the account of how he was turned from apprentice priest into prophet offers an invitation not to be too overawed. The first time I myself received a 'picture' from God for someone, I knew it could not be a picture from God because I was not the sort of person to whom that sort of thing happened. Only because of something that took place subsequently did I realize that it was and therefore I was. Most people I know learn to speak in tongues because someone teaches them, but one friend of mine spoke in tongues first and was relieved to discover subsequently that this practice came in the Bible.

So Samuel deserves some sympathy when, hearing someone calling his name, he jumps up and runs to Eli on the assumption it was him calling. Eli's poor sight means he needs Samuel's help if he is to find his way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. And Eli deserves some sympathy for assuming that the boy had been dreaming. The second time, the young man walks rather than runs. 'This being woken up umpteen times per night and then having to be up at the crack of dawn for the sacrifices has ceased to be a joke'. When he again sends Samuel back to bed, Eli adds 'my son'. 'This being woken up umpteen times per night and then having to be up at the crack of dawn for the sacrifices has ceased to be a joke'. Is the 'my son' a sign that nevertheless he does appreciate the boy's love, or is it a sign of understandable impatience?

Meanwhile the time difference meant that the cabinet in heaven was still in session even though it was night in the middle east. Later in the meeting when they had decided to commission Samuel in this way, the Adversary proposes that they had chosen the wrong person. They needed someone with more intelligence than Samuel. God grins and reminds him that you always have to make allowances with human beings ('long-tempered' was actually God's word; 'soft-hearted' is the Adversary's). Yes, it is true that Samuel does not yet 'know' Yahweh (3:7). But there is time.

The comment that Samuel did not know Yahweh is an extraordinary one, and it is difficult to be sure precisely how to understand it. His mother, after all, evidently knew Yahweh, and presumably passed on that knowledge to Samuel. At the cathedral Samuel has been serving Yahweh, growing up with Yahweh. Perhaps we must assume that Samuel's not yet knowing Yahweh is explained by the phrase that follows. It is another way of saying that Samuel had not yet received a revelation from Yahweh, that this was the first time that Yahweh had spoken to him. He did not yet recognize Yahweh.

Yahweh had one more try. And it is actually Eli who perceives what is going on. So he is not so blind. Sometimes the spiritual counsellor may be able to perceive the nature of an experience, even if he or she has never had it. 'Next time, if Yahweh calls you, say "Speak, Yahweh, for your servant is listening"'.

So Samuel went and lay down again. There was an initial note about the lamp of God not yet having gone out. It suggests that dawn (when the lamp would no longer be needed) is not so far away. Is Samuel now unable to get back to sleep? And does Eli lie awake, too? I know what I would be thinking, whether I were Eli or Samuel. I would be sure that the voice of God would never come again, that I had blown it, lost my chance. I would be sure that I would spend my life henceforth saying 'If only I had realized the first time, or even the second time'. After all, you only get one chance, or even two, but not three....

Except that Yahweh not the Adversary chairs the cabinet, and is never in a hurry, and is always giving people second and third chances (that is why history

has gone on so long). Indeed this time Yahweh comes in person and stands in front of Samuel, calling as before, but there this time not just as a voice but as a presence. This time there would be no danger of confusing Yahweh's voice with Eli's. So why did Yahweh not appear like this before, and make everything easier for everyone?

Another of Yahweh's characteristics is admittedly a disinclination to do things the easy way. One effect is to give more substance to the story. The story of a call to leadership may need some substance if it is to remain convincing over the years, to the leader and to the led. So the stories of Moses and Gideon and Jeremiah emphasize their attempts to evade God's call, while Isaiah's and Ezekiel's emphasize the transcendent awesomeness of God's appearing to them. But another effect of Yahweh's declining to make what was going on more inescapable to Samuel from the beginning is that Eli has now become part of this story of Samuel's call. And Eli is about to be the subject of it, too. There is no hiding Yahweh's call from Eli.

We often treat the call of people such as Samuel or Isaiah or Jeremiah as patterns for God's calling of us, for God's call to some form of Christian ministry. If so, they are frightening patterns. This is highlighted by the fact that we stop reading the story once Samuel has said 'Speak, for your servant is listening', or Isaiah has said 'Here I am, send me', or Jeremiah has been assured 'Do not be afraid of them: I am with you to deliver you'. But Samuel and Isaiah and Jeremiah had to continue listening to the end of the paragraph. And it tends to transpire that there is another reason why there is so much substance to the stories of how these people came to be sucked into Yahweh's service. That service was negative, destructive, judgmental, and threatening. Theirs was not a call to an encouraging pastoral ministry or a life-giving evangelistic one. It was a call to threaten, to harden, and to break down. And if you have to walk into that ministry, for your sake and for your people's there had better be some grounds for being sure that it is God who is driving you into it rather than your own aggressiveness or negativity.

The Significance of This Revelation

Yahweh tells Samuel that things are to happen to Eli and his family that will scare the pants off everyone who hears of them. That means everyone - full stop. Eli is, after all, the senior priest at Israel's central place of worship. The contents of the revelation do not surprise us, because we have already read about the announcement being made to Eli himself in the previous chapter. But apparently Samuel does not know about that.

It is another slightly odd feature of the story that Samuel seems to go through the experience lying down, while Yahweh stands there speaking. Usually people stand in the presence of God, rather than vice versa. This story does recall the picture of Yahweh standing before Abraham after telling him about the calamity that was coming for Sodom, and waiting to see if Abraham wishes to say anything about it (Genesis 18:22: though the word for 'stand' is a different one). When Yahweh stops speaking, Samuel continues to lie there. What goes through his head? Is he dumbfounded by the experience of Yahweh appearing and speaking? Is he awed by its possible implications for his future if this is only a beginning? Is he horrified by the content of Yahweh's words, as well as perhaps relieved that Yahweh is going to do something about the way things were in the cathedral?

The story's direct implication is that he lay there awake, knowing that he would have to tell Eli what God had said. That ambiguous way in which Yahweh had called to Samuel meant that Eli knew what was going on. And Samuel did not want to have to tell him. He 'was afraid to tell the vision to Eli'. For all the austereness of Samuel, and even if he is glad that Yahweh is going to do

something about the goings on in the cathedral, he gets no joy from being the bearer of terrible news, any more than Isaiah or Jeremiah did. The message concerns his adoptive father. It concerns his mentor. He lies there through the remaining hours of the night unable to sleep but wishing that dawn might never come. But it comes, and he gets up for his routine duties, and wonders what to do next, and his wondering is forestalled by Eli, as perhaps he thought it might be. There is no escape from telling him.

Admittedly there was an odd feature about Yahweh's words to Samuel. They did not include any instructions about what he was supposed to do with the information he was given. Now perhaps the audience of this story is assumed to have the wit to infer that when Yahweh reveals something to someone like Samuel, he will be able to work out that he is supposed to tell the people affected by it. Yet there are subtleties in this story. To begin with, we know from that preceding chapter about the visit from the 'man of God' that both Eli and the audience know about the calamity that is coming. The revelation does not actually reveal anything. So perhaps it is given as much for Samuel's sake as for Eli's, so that the man who will have to pick up some of the pieces knows what jigsaw they came from.

Further, the way the story closes suggests that this revelation is part of the relation between Samuel and the people. The young minister at the cathedral already impresses them. The story of this revelation from Yahweh, which says nothing new, begins the process of establishing Samuel as much more than the people have realized. From now on, as he grew up, 'Yahweh was with him'. Was Yahweh not with him already? Indeed Yahweh was, in our sense, but when the Bible says God is with you, it does not merely mean that you have a nice cozy feeling, a warm religious experience. Yahweh's presence means Yahweh's power. It means that things happen. So Yahweh 'let none of his words fall to the ground'. When Yahweh spoke via Samuel, things happened. Yahweh did not let his words fail to do things, any more than the rain can fall without doing miracles of growth on dry soil (Isaiah 55:10-11). The situation at Shiloh had changed. For long there had been a drought, and therefore a famine (Amos 8:11). Yahweh's appearing and speaking to Samuel was but the beginning of such appearing and speaking to him, and of Samuel's passing on Yahweh's words to Israel (1 Samuel 3:19-4.1).

Samuel is to be at the centre of a chain of events that brings a fourfold revolution in Israel, replacing judges by kings and prophets, an Eli priesthood by a Zadok priesthood, and a cathedral in Shiloh by one in Jerusalem.

2

The Man for Whom It Was Too Late (1 Samuel 1-4)

Too Late for Eli

There was a Canadian management guru called Lawrence Peter who formulated the 'Peter Principle': everyone gets promoted to beyond their level of competence. It is related somehow (perhaps inversely) to Catch 22. You are good at something, so you get promoted. You are good at it again, so you get promoted again. And so on, until you are no good at it, and then it is too late, for you and for everyone else.

It was too late for Eli, and for everyone else. Admittedly traditional societies like ancient Israel sidestep the problem of the Peter Principle, along with the obverse virtues of the meritocracy, by not having a meritocracy. You become a priest or a king because your father was one, not by doing well as a levite or winning an election. So no one can expect you to be competent.

Poor Eli was not. He failed to keep order in church. He failed to recognize a pastoral problem when it presented itself to him. He failed to stop talking patriarchally even when it had been made pretty clear that Yahweh was doing something somewhat special with Hannah (2:20-21: Eli prays for Elkanah's sake, but Yahweh takes note of Hannah). He failed to get his sons (who also became priests just because their father was one) to exercise their ministry on any other basis than a concern to look after themselves. Indeed he was implicated in the results, perhaps because the whole priestly family ate from the same table (2:29). He failed to get them to sort out their relationships (2:22-25). But these sons have taken over as priests and Eli is perhaps a kind of honorary priest, like the former minister who has retired locally and helps out at Christmas and Easter. As well as being a priest, Eli is described as someone who had 'judged' (that is 'led') Israel (4:18) like the 'judges' or leaders in the book of Judges, and the tale of disorder and defeat in which he is central is a continuation of that book. But like Samson, he is in some ways a parody of a judge (Jobling, p. 51). Worse than Samson, in a way, he is part of the problem instead of the means of its solution.

So we first meet him at the Israelite equivalent of one of these festive occasions, probably the feast in the autumn when Israel gathered before Yahweh. They celebrated harvest, and the old year's ending and the new year's beginning, and also the liberating of their ancestors from Egypt centuries before, which made it possible for them to be a free people here in the land of milk and honey. Eli sits at the door of the cathedral in charge of making sure that no one comes in who should not do so - for instance, because they have been celebrating the harvest a little too enthusiastically (1:9, 13-14).

At least the contrast with Hophni and Phinehas makes clear that before God and the people Eli's heart and spirit were in the right place. At least he wanted the house of God to be a place of prayer and not a den of thieves. At least he was sometimes able to get his pastoral act right at the second time of asking, as he did with Hannah when he learned to recognize the difference between being overwhelmed by Spirit and by spirit. Of course often we get no second chance with people. At least he could recognize the voice of Yahweh at the third time of asking. I do not know how often God knocks three times (3:1-9). As far as we can tell, there was no one more insightful in the community, except Hannah herself, but she belonged to the wrong sex. Women had to settle for being prophets, the role that did not and could not pass from parent to offspring. But Eli had never been up to the job of leadership. And Yahweh has designated his successor.

It was now too late in another sense. Eli is ninety-eight years old (4:15). We are beyond the time in the Old Testament when ages seem wildly out of proportion, so perhaps he really had had ninety-eight candles on his cake and wished there was a king who could send him a greetings telegram in two years' time. Even if we assume he was literally more like eighty-eight or seventy-eight, he is an old man.

I once knew a minister who exercised an effective ministry within a big ministerial team, and as a result was appointed the senior pastor in another big team. It did not work. It was a classic example of the Peter Principle in operation. It was not exactly a disaster. The team worked round him and things got done. But they knew that he was not up to the job, that he was out of his depth, that he was not waving but drowning. I suspect he knew, too. One Wednesday he dropped dead. It was the only way he knew to get out of the situation.

Eli has not managed to do that. Life will not go away. He cannot do much more than sit about. Indeed, in the story he moves between sitting and lying down (1:9; 3:2; 4:13). He is never the subject of verbs such as 'walk' or 'stand'. It is those wretched sons who have to do the active things. He is sitting on 'his seat': you know how you will see an old man sitting on 'his

seat' watching life go by. Actually Eli cannot even watch life go by. He listens to life go by. His sight has deteriorated, and then gone (3:2; 4:15).

Too Late for Eli's Sons

And it is too late. It is too late to do anything about his sons. Eli had no doubt tried to bring up Hophni and Phinehas to honour Yahweh as he did, to serve Yahweh as he did, to live honourably before Yahweh as he did. Perhaps they could only see the feebleness of it all, the feebleness of their father, the feebleness of Israel under pressure from the Philistines, the feebleness of Yahweh who seemed unable to do anything about it. In any case, Eli had failed. Perhaps they were just overwhelmed by the temptations of ministry.

There were two classic ministerial temptations they had fallen for. Instead of their ministry being one exercised for God and for their people, it was exercised for themselves (2:12-17). Their calling was to help people reach out to God. They were turning that into a means of doing well for themselves. They were feeding off the people rather than feeding them, taking for themselves gifts that were designed to be expressions of commitment to God. In addition, they were involved in sexual relationships with fellow-ministers, and you cannot keep that kind of thing secret forever (2:22-24). When priests accidentally went wrong in their ministry, there were ways to find cleansing, so as to restore the situation. If they deliberately walked in wrong ways but came to their senses and turned back to Yahweh and also made appropriate offerings, they could find cleansing and restoration. But no amount of sacrifice and offering can cover up a continuing life of the kind that they were living (3:14).

Eli had come to know and he had confronted them about it, but it was too late. Yahweh had decided it was too late. In one of those frightening Old Testament comments, the narrator tells us that they would not listen to Eli because Yahweh had decided to kill them (2:25). The implication is not that they are involved in these sins against their will, as if they would have liked to repent but are inhibited because God will not let them. Perhaps the implication is the obverse. Repentance is a miracle brought about by the Holy Spirit, and God is not going to do the miracle. To use the Old Testament's own language, people 'turn' because God 'turns' them. And it is too late. Things have gone too far. God's desire for Israel is going to be worked out by other means than the line of Eli.

Eli's two sons had been blaspheming God, and Eli had not restrained them (3:13). What was he supposed to have done? If he is an old man, presumably they are men in the prime of life themselves, even in late middle-age. Presumably whatever should have been done, should have been done years before. I know the minister of a successful church who had three sons, all of whom grew to be committed Christians. I know the minister of another successful church who had two sons, both of whom turned their backs on their father's faith. The two men were rather similar. To be honest, if I had been the son of either, I can imagine myself rebelling by rejecting my father's faith so as to find space for myself. What decides whether one succeeds, the other fails? What did Eli do wrong?

To judge from hints in the story about Eli's own personality and faith, he would have wanted to bring up his sons in the right ways. But he had failed to restrain them from the wrong ways. It is odd that a man who could be straight with a woman whom he thought to be 'a worthless woman' (1:16) failed to be straight with his own 'worthless' sons (2:12). Or perhaps it is not. I know yet another pastor who has two sons, not yet grown up, who speaks from a woman's perspective. Like God in Hosea 11, she knows she could never reject her sons, never throw them out, never disown them. They will always be her sons, no matter what they should do. Perhaps Eli felt that attachment to his sons, but

was thus unable to be straight with them. This note is one that will recur in David's story, with even more terrible implications.

And now it is too late for Eli, and even more too late for Hophni and Phinehas. They have joined in an ill-fated, ill-considered venture with the 'ark' of Yahweh. The ark that resided in the cathedral was a chest in which Israel was required to keep the stones on which were inscribed the Ten Words proclaiming Yahweh's basic requirements of Israel: that they should worship no other gods, make no images of God, and so on. We do not know how much of all this applied precisely at this moment at a place such as Shiloh, but Shiloh is apparently Israel's central place of worship at the time, so the general idea will be the same. The chest sat in the most holy part of the cathedral, the place where Yahweh promised to be present to meet with Israel. Above it towered two carved figures, celestial beings with wings, the cherubim, and above them Yahweh promised to sit enthroned in the presence of the people. This chest thus stood for the mutual relationship between Yahweh and Israel, for the presence of Yahweh and the commitment of Israel.

Shiloh sits on the mountain ridge that runs down through Israel between the coastal plain and the Jordan valley. In an ongoing struggle for control of the region, the Philistines have defeated Israel in battle down near Aphek at the point where hills become plain and Israelite territory becomes indisputably Philistine territory. Ironically, the place where the Israelites had camped was called *Eben-ha'ezer*, 'The stone of help', but it has become the place of defeat. To put it theologically, 'Yahweh has put Israel to rout before the Philistines' (4:3).

Why had this happened? The leaders wisely ask this question, but they ask it only rhetorically. Before waiting to answer, they urge that the covenant chest be brought from Shiloh. That might be a splendid move. It might imply that Eli's young assistant, Samuel, also came. In the old days, Moses would meet with Yahweh in the moveable shrine where they kept the covenant chest, and Yahweh would speak with him there. There Yahweh would tell Moses what Israel was to do, when they were to be on the move and where. Fetching the chest, the elders might have asked Samuel what he thought about why Israel had been defeated. After all, we have just been told that his word was coming to all Israel (4:1).

But after that statement, Samuel disappears from this story for some while, apparently in an act of collusion between a people who do not listen and a God who does not speak. For when they jump from asking their question to urging that the covenant chest be brought from Shiloh, it is not so that they can seek an answer. They believe that the presence of the chest will in itself bring the presence of Yahweh in person, come among them to rescue Israel from the power of its enemies.

There is a nice reversal of a pattern that had obtained in Israel's earlier story. There Yahweh was the kind of God who was present and active out in the world, but also secondarily could be met in church. That has now been turned round to the pattern we are familiar with in the church, where the question is whether you can get Yahweh back out of church (having been confined there by us) into the world. So that was how Hophni and Phinehas came to be at Ebenezer, as priests caring for the covenant chest when it was brought there.

Too Late for Theology

The story of the covenant chest's adventure (1 Samuel 4) is told with a marvellous interweaving of psychological, religious, and theological perspectives. Let us take the last first.

In a sense I lie. A striking feature of this story is that there are no overt theological judgments in it. There are no comments at all on what God was

actually thinking and doing. This is a marked contrast with the chapters on either side. There is nothing with which atheists would have to disagree. Indeed they would find the psychological and religious perspectives entirely plausible. They are just the kind of perspectives they would bring to other chapters to replace the overt theological judgments, when the narrator says that God did or said this or that. Perhaps we may infer that for Eli and Hophni and Phinehas and this whole Israelite generation, it is too late for theological judgments. God has nothing else to say. Events will be allowed to speak. The epicentre of theological judgments has moved on. 'The word of Yahweh was rare in those days. Visions were not widespread' (3:1). We have noted that Eli needed two or three chances to hear Yahweh's word when it did come. When Yahweh sent a strange messenger to warn Eli of the terrible calamity that was coming on his line, we are told of no response at all (2:27-36). There was one exception to that rule. Through Samuel Yahweh then gave one last final revelation to Eli, and he heard it first time (3:18). Yahweh has begun appearing to Samuel at Shiloh and begun speaking to him there: so chapter 3 closes. Yahweh has nothing else to say to or through Eli, and certainly not to or through Hophni and Phinehas.

So there is no theology in 1 Samuel 4. As we have seen, there is religion, accounts of how Israelite and Philistine faith worked, and there is irony about it. Israelite faith turns out to be really no better than Philistine faith, arguably worse.

In modern parlance 'Philistine' has become a first-class insult. It suggests people with no taste or sensitivity or culture or insight. There are hints that the word has parallel pejorative implications in these stories. The Philistines are often referred to as 'uncircumcised', in contrast to Israel and its neighbours. There was something very strange about the Philistines for not practising circumcision. It was somehow a sign of something. Perhaps it was a sign of their being foreigners in a deeper sense than people such as the Canaanites were. The Canaanites were longstanding inhabitants of Canaan. The name tells it all, even if later the Philistines did provide the name 'Palestine'. The Canaanites spoke a similar language to the Israelites. The Philistines came from exotic lands across the sea. They were genuine foreigners. They were strange.

Yet the Old Testament also notes that Yahweh brought them from where they used to live, as Yahweh brought the Israelites from where they used to live in Egypt (Amos 9:7). It is an astonishing comparison and an astonishing implied comment on Yahweh's concern with them as a people. The stories about the way Yahweh relates to them in the time of Samuel will fit in with it.

When the covenant chest arrives at the Israelite army headquarters and the Philistines hear the enthusiastic Israelite reaction, they recognize that something supernatural is happening. Indeed the story tells us with more irony that the Philistines resemble Rahab in Jericho. They know about Yahweh and about what Yahweh did in defeating Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and they recognize that no one can rescue them from such power. They just have to try to rescue themselves. They believe in Yahweh's power, yet they do not.

This means they are no better but no worse than the Israelites. That enthusiasm about the covenant chest's arrival suggests faith in Yahweh. But what kind of faith in Yahweh thinks that the arrival of a religious symbol makes the difference between Yahweh's presence in power and Yahweh's absence?

And that runs into the psychological perspectives. In its absence of theological judgments this is a marvellously modern chapter - or rather a frighteningly modern one. Neither Israelites nor Philistines really believe in Yahweh. Or rather, both combine recognition of Yahweh with the assumption that everything depends on them. There is of course a sense in which we do need to hold those two assumptions together, but not in the way Israelites and Philistines did. In their heads they acknowledge the power of God, but when the

dirt hits the road they know they are on their own. Religion's significance is that it may help you to feel better. It may be psychologically good for you.

So the arrival of the covenant chest does wonders for Israelite morale. They will fight much more bravely. And that is how God works, a broad-minded theologian might say. The trouble is that the arrival of the covenant chest does even more for Philistine morale. Or rather, fright is even better for them psychologically. Galvanized by fear, they fight even better. And that is also how God works, a broad-minded theologian might say. Because this storyteller who makes no mention of God certainly believes that God is involved. But unaffected by explicit theology or true religion, psychology wins the day and Israel experiences a terrible defeat.

Meanwhile Eli sits in his seat by the road in Shiloh, near the cathedral with its empty holy place and the town emptied of its able-bodied men. There will have been no way of knowing when a battle would take place. Unable to peer with those sightless eyes, Eli no doubt strains an ear for a male voice, one that does not belong to the young, the old, or the infirm, or for the voice of women catching sight of men coming home. In this sense Eli 'watches' too, insofar as he can, his heart trembling for the covenant chest (4:13). So is there faith and unfaith in Eli too, a belief in Yahweh yet an uncertainty regarding whether Yahweh can look after this symbol? Or has Eli indeed listened well at last to Yahweh's message, and does he know in his heart what must be the result of this ill-fated expedition? Is this an understated theological judgment on the Israelites and their religious and theological and psychological confusion?

Too Late for the Splendour

It is thirty miles from Aphek back up to Shiloh, all of it a climb from the coastal plain north of Tel Aviv to the mountain ridge north of Jerusalem. A messenger runs the whole way the very day of the battle. His clothes are torn and he has dirt rubbed onto his head. This is not the disarray of battle itself but the mark of grief. That in itself no doubt tells the waiting women the kind of news he brings. But they have to wait till his actual arrival to hear precisely what has happened. Eli hears the commotion in the city square. 'What is going on, what has happened, won't someone tell me something?' The messenger hauls himself to his feet again, knowing that it is he who must tell the helpless old man. 'Israel has fled before the Philistines. There has been a great slaughter among the troops. Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead. God's chest has been captured.'

When someone relays bad news, they order it so as to break it as gently as possible. They work gradually towards the inevitable moment when the most terrible thing has to be uttered. For messenger and hearer there has to be time. Both know that something horrendous is to be said, but there has to be time to prepare. 'There's been a car crash. Your father was injured. I'm afraid your mother - there was nothing they could do. She died in the ambulance'. The messenger knows and we know that for Eli slaughter is worse than defeat, and that the death of his own sons is worse than the loss of other Israelites. But it is the symbol of Yahweh's presence that Eli has been trembling for and it is its capture that is the most terrible announcement. And when Eli hears the news that he most fears, he collapses. His aged, stiff, heavy body falls to the ground with all its weight. He will not even sit again. He will only lie in the tomb, perhaps next to his sons, if it was possible to recover their bodies.

There is a footnote to Eli's story. One of the women who were anxiously awaiting news of their husbands and fathers and sons and lovers was one of Eli's daughters-in-law. She was nine-months pregnant. Suddenly, in moments, the chest is captured, her father-in-law is dead, and her husband is dead. The news

throws her into labour, but the labour overwhelms her. In a pre-modern society, giving birth is always a dangerous business, for both mother and baby. Sometimes the baby would die, sometimes both mother and baby. In the world today, every minute a woman dies from pregnancy or giving birth and their complications. This mother gives her life for her baby. As she ails in the very process of giving birth, the women who are with her acting as midwives tell her that it is a boy.

The only response they receive is a phrase they take as a name, *I-kabod*. The *kabod* of God is God's majestic splendour, the splendour visible at moments such as Yahweh's deliverance of the people from the Egyptians and Yahweh's coming to dwell in the tent-shrine. A battle with the Philistines, the covenant chest, the father-in law who was a priest, the husband who was a priest: in theory they all spoke of that majestic splendour. They were all associated with the glory of God. But in that context, Phinehas's wife exclaims 'The splendour has gone' or 'Alas for the splendour' or 'Where is the splendour?' (McCarter). The name's precise meaning is uncertain, but the general idea is clear. Actually the splendour had gone long ago, and perhaps Phinehas's wife knew that. Presumably the stories about her husband and the women ministers in the cathedral also reached her.

What did giving birth to Phinehas's baby mean in that context? It is too late for her, too. The splendour went long ago. So with a dying breath whose wish cannot be gainsaid she names her son *I-kabod*. It is because of God's chest, and because of her father-in-law, and because of her husband. It is not specifically because they have died. They saw the splendour off while they lived, Phinehas with his fine food and his love affair, his father with his failure to confront. Their death was only the verification of this. But she too grieved especially because of God's chest (4:21-22). The departure of the sign of God's presence is the most terrifying sign of the departure of splendour. It is too late.

As father-in-law and daughter-in-law had waited and watched and listened and wondered and trembled, was there anything to take the edge off their fear? Was there anything to take the edge off the fact of having been the man who simply was not big enough for his job, whether it was the job of being priest or the job of being parent? Was there anything to take the edge off the fact of having been the woman who married the wrong man and had the wrong baby, so that in different senses she lost herself to both of them? In recent years in Western society we have begun to try to face the fact of death, not least of our own death as it approaches, and to seek to die a good death. Someone who discovers that they have a terminal illness may have particular opportunity to prepare for death. Someone who faces martyrdom or execution may have that opportunity. They say that your life passes before you when you die. I am sure that these two peoples' lives passed before them as they sat waiting and watching and listening and wondering and trembling. You have the opportunity to make sense of your life, to ask what it has been about, to own it, to stop pretending about what you will do one day.

When we took up the offer of seven free videos for joining a video club, my wife and I knew that *Dead Man Walking* was one we would want. It is the story of a man on death row and the woman who tries to get him pardoned. She fails, and at the end of the film two things happen before the actual execution. One is that he owns that he did commit the murder after all. The other is that he finds God's forgiveness. In some sense neither could have happened without the other. This is not merely (for instance) because God would have withheld forgiveness unless the man had confessed what he had done. It is because the same kind of opening up of oneself to oneself as well as to other people is required for confession to another person as for seeking forgiveness from God. The person we thought was innocent becomes a murderer, but he also becomes a man. That is the miracle God did not do for Hophni and Phinehas.

The film version of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* ends in a similar way. In the course of the witchhunt in Salem, Massachusetts, in the seventeenth century, the girl with whom John Proctor has had an affair has falsely accused him of witchcraft. If he will sign a false confession he will be pardoned. If not, he will hang. At first he signs, so that he can resume his life with his wife. Through this very process their relationship becomes one of reality and love and forgiveness. But with her connivance and pride he recants this falsehood and hangs. On the gallows the previously unbelieving Proctor joins with the others who are being executed in proclaiming the Lord's Prayer, and as he dies becomes a man.

Eli's equivalent moment was the one where he stood before Samuel, the young man he might have resented because he had taken Eli's place in Yahweh's affections. Eli acknowledges to him, 'It is Yahweh. He must do what seems good to him'. It was the second time that he had been forewarned of the calamity that hung over his family, first by an anonymous religious person who appears out of the blue, but now by this young man who might have seemed the faithful son he had never had. His words of response could be words of resignation. In a sense they are. But in the context of his pressing Samuel to tell him what Yahweh has said, they are more likely words in which he prepares to die a good death. Perhaps, like the narrator of the story, he knew that his failure to discipline his sons successfully involved Yahweh as much as him (2:25). The two of them have to share responsibility, and arguably Yahweh's proactive responsibility is the greater.

When his daughter-in-law declares 'Splendour has gone', there is even more ambiguity, or even less reason to find hope in the words. Perhaps she had lost all hope. But at least she has her mind focused on the aspect of these terrible events that is most significant. That, she knew, was not the death of her father-in-law or the death of her husband or even the orphaning of her son before he was born. It was the departing of the splendour. And we know that this will not be the end of the story. So did Eli, and so I imagine did she, though we are given no hint that she could think about it at this moment of being overwhelmed by the threefold terror.

But we, and Eli, and (I imagine) she know about that other woman giving birth, whose rejoicing provided a framework for hearing her story and Eli's (see 2:1-10). You cannot manipulate God into acting, and God may settle for apparent defeat in order to make the point, but that does not alter the fact that Hannah had declared, that 'there is no Rock like our God'. Yahweh kills, but Yahweh also brings to life. Yahweh will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed. It is too late for father-in-law and daughter-in-law, but they form part of a bigger story for which it is not too late.

3

The Men with a Painful Affliction (1 Samuel 5-7)

Whatever Happened to Dagon?

Politics and religion are always interwoven. Religion is too powerful a force to be ignored by people involved in politics. They will be wise to make religion work their way. It was a version of that awareness that made the Israelites bring Yahweh's chest to the battle with the Philistines. And it was a version of that awareness that caused the Philistines to make sure they got hold of it after they had won. They took it back from that ironically named

battle site, Ebenezer, where Yahweh had been no 'help' at all to Israel, to one of the five cities in their confederation, Ashdod. With further irony, Ashdod is now Israel's own deep-sea port and is thus a key to Israel's economy.

There in Ashdod the Philistines put the chest in the temple of their God Dagon. There has been some speculation about what kind of god Dagon was. His name is very like the Hebrew word for grain, which might suggest to Israelites that he was a god who specialized in making sure that the wheat grew - an important consideration in any economy. Dagon's actual name connects with a word for rain, and that may link with his being a god associated with the harvest. Rain is crucial if the wheat is to grow. But his name is also similar to the Hebrew word for fish, and tradition came to reckon that he was essentially a fish god. This would fit with his city being a seaport. It would be good news if it meant he was on the side of fishermen, though not if he was on the side of fish.

The question at least illustrates something about the nature of religion when you believe in a number of gods. They share responsibility for human needs and you can find a god who cares about whatever is your particular need. One can see what an encouraging theology this might be, and Israelites were usually tempted to follow it. They often had difficulty believing that Yahweh looked after everything. What kind of God could do that? And if such a God existed, how could this God care about my particular needs? So they usually followed the polytheism of their neighbours, at least until late in Old Testament times.

On a good day, putting Yahweh's chest in Dagon's temple next to Dagon's image might be a gesture of hospitality. This is the house where Dagon lives and Dagon is welcoming Yahweh as guest. In a context like the present one, it is more likely a gesture of humiliation. Here is Yahweh forced to acknowledge the sovereignty of Dagon. The point the Philistines want to make is that political one. Yahweh's subordination to Dagon is the religious equivalent to Israel's subordination to Philistia.

The trouble with Yahweh is that this God will not be confined to being a symbol of a political point. The battle near Ebenezer has already demonstrated to the Israelites that Yahweh will not be manipulated into functioning as a mere prop for the Israelite war effort or for Israelite morale. The aftermath of the battle will now demonstrate to the Philistines that neither will Yahweh be manipulated into becoming a mere prop for Philistine politics. In the story, it will demonstrate this to Philistia, but we need to keep bearing in mind that the Israelites themselves are the people for whom this story is told. It is designed to be an encouragement and a challenge to them.

The Philistines bring the chest into Dagon's temple and set it next to Dagon, no doubt with due ceremony. They go off to bed. Early next morning they get up and Dagon's priests open the temple doors and let the early morning light stream into the temple and start getting the sacrifices ready and prepare for the arrival of people to pray ... and find that Dagon has fallen on his face before Yahweh.

Now it is always disturbing when your god falls over. The prophets go in for considerable sarcastic critique of the kind of god who can be represented by an image. Being that kind of god was a rather pathetic business, they thought. So was being the kind of people who worshipped that kind of god, or spent their lives making such images (see e.g. Isaiah 44:9-20). Of course the fact that they needed to attack these images of gods implies that the Israelites were attracted to them. They could be drawn to worshipping gods who had images, gods other than Yahweh. Or they could be attracted to the idea of making images of Yahweh to aid them in their worship of Yahweh.

Images are a paradoxical business. On the one hand, they make your religion something you can see and touch. They stop it being something that merely goes on inside your head. Yet there are severe limits to what an image can convey. The problem is not that God is spirit rather than matter - at least, that is not

how the Old Testament expresses it. After all, God could be imaged by human beings (Genesis 1) and could therefore become a human being, so the difficulty is not the gap between God and the physical or material. Indeed, the link between God and human beings points us to where the problem lies. Human beings are all-singing, all-dancing creatures, entities that you cannot tie down until they are dead. It is of the essence of being human that you speak and act. You cannot make an image of a human being. And the same is true of God. That is the fundamental basis for the critique of images in Deuteronomy 4. That chapter reminds Israel that the basic things that Israel learned about God through leaving Egypt and sojourning at Sinai were that Yahweh was someone who did things and spoke. And you cannot represent that by means of an image. An image can only give a misleading impression of the kind of God that Yahweh was.

There is also something sinister about an image. You can control it. As we will see in chapter 14, as well as not liking the idea of being represented by an image, Yahweh did not like the idea of being made to live in a house (see 2 Samuel 7). Yahweh had various theological objections to that, but one was closely related to the objection to images. The nature of a house is to be in a fixed location. Yahweh liked being flexible, being on the move, able to go off and do new things. Human beings prefer God to be predictable. If you can get God to settle down, then you can know where you are with God. You can get some control of things. And that fits with another aspect of the theological unease that God will imply in 2 Samuel 7. When a human being like David wants to build God a house, that implicitly reverses the relationship between God and human beings. It turns that relationship into one whereby you look after God instead of God looking after you. It is another aspect of control, of the human desire to domesticate God. Images enable you to attempt that.

There is a symbol of much of this that the prophets have fun with. Images of gods were regularly nailed to the ground. There were doubtless sensible reasons for that. For the prophets, it was a telling practice. If you do not fix your god in position, it may fall over. What kind of god needs to be propped up so that it does not topple? I thought gods were supposed to stop you falling over?

Evidently Philistine gods were that kind of god. The morning after the humiliated arrival of Yahweh's covenant chest in Dagon's house in Ashdod, Dagon has fallen on his face before Yahweh. The people of Ashdod prop Dagon back up again, suspecting a coup by Mossad, the Israeli secret service, and determining to improve temple security. But next morning the same thing has happened again - indeed, much worse. Dagon is again prostrate before the covenant chest, and this time his head and his hands have been cut off. All Dagon has left is his trunk. The Philistines conclude that it is definitely Mossad and the commander of the Philistine secret service loses her own head.

'You think I am making this up?,' asks the storyteller. 'Have you ever been in the Philistine temple at Ashdod? Have you noticed how they won't let anyone step on the platform round Dagon's image? Why do you think that is? It is because that is where Dagon fell that day.' And the story's Israelite audience remembers singing Psalm 115 with its scorn of images that have mouths and eyes and ears and noses and hands and feet but cannot speak or see or hear or smell or feel or go anywhere. There before the Philistines' eyes Dagon has become what he always was, an entity that does not really have a head and hands, a being that cannot sense anything or do anything.

Whatever Happened to the Philistines?

Having your theology deconstructed in that way would be bad, but it was not all. If that was all that happened to you, you can still go about your daily life. Perhaps you were never very religious anyway. But it was not all. In addition 'Yahweh's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod.' Here is a paradox. There

was a god who had hands you could see but who could not do anything with them. And there was a God who had hands you could not see but who made you feel the effect of them. Yahweh more than made up for the lack of visible attributes by making things happen that indicated that someone real was active here.

Feeling the hand of Yahweh is a little like feeling the policeman's hand on your shoulder, or having someone hit you when you are not looking, or finding yourself falling over in a charismatic meeting when you do not think anyone pushed you. The NRSV coyly tells us that the effect was that the Philistines grew tumours, which may strike us as both more horrendous and less horrendous than it actually was. The tumours were actually something like hemorrhoids and they seem to have issued from having diarrhea. This is the stuff of situation comedy and no doubt the Israelites were intended to laugh at the idea of the Philistines queuing to use the bathroom. It does not seem so funny when you are the person having the experience, especially when you have the resultant extremely sore bottom.

More important, diarrhea can of course be a very serious business. You can die of dehydration through diarrhea. World Health Organization statistics indicate that among people under 44, a similar number of people die of diarrhea as die of AIDS. Only respiratory infections such as pneumonia are a bigger killer. Here in the Philistia there is something much worse to face. This is no ordinary diarrhea such as you could stop up with a dose of kaolin, which anyway had not been invented. The Hebrew word is related to the word for bubonic plague or cholera, and it seems that this is the affliction that struck the Philistines. It was a very serious business indeed.

The Ashdodites were able to put two and two together. Their affliction and their god's affliction had a reason, and the new feature of life in Ashdod that explained both was the presence of Yahweh's chest there. So they reacted in the way people do when the government wants to build a nuclear disposal plant or a mental hospital in their community: 'Not in my back yard.' They call for a meeting of the Philistine General Council and demand that the chest be moved to another of their cities. The people of Gath draw the short straw. Actually the NRSV follows the Greek Old Testament in having the people of Gath volunteer to have it there. This would presumably be another joke, at the expense of the Gittites. They were apparently unable to put two and two together, unless it was that they believed they had better plumbing. But they soon found themselves spending as long in the bathroom as the Ashdodites, and they briskly sent the chest off to the next of the five Philistine towns on its potential itinerary. The people of Ekron saw it coming and called for another meeting of the Council. Yahweh's chest must go.

The man who provided the chapter divisions in our Bible, in the Middle Ages, was Archbishop Stephen Langton. He often made a mess of it, but at this point he was inspired. In the last, killer line of 1 Samuel 5, after the serious joke played on Dagon and his worshippers, we are told that 'the city's cry went up to heaven' (5:12). It is a most unexpected observation. The wonder of comedy can be the moment when someone says something really serious and you take it more seriously than you might otherwise have done because your guard is down. This is a story that has been holding together seriousness and comedy. It is black (death) comedy.

When we went to see the film *Life is Beautiful*, we did so against the advice of the *LA Weekly*, which did not think it possible to make a comedy about the holocaust. The film succeeds because it is a serious comedy. It is not *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Spy Who Shagged Me*. The story about the Philistines and their sore bottoms and their dying from the plague is neither a light-hearted comedy nor a Western in which Israel plays the cowboys and the Philistines play the Indians. It is not an exercise in chauvinism.

The words are familiar. Genesis 4:10 spoke of the cry of murdered Abel's blood going up to heaven, and Exodus 3:7-9 applied the words to the cry of the

Israelites oppressed by Egypt. One might have inferred that they were the kind of words that applied only to the likes of Abel and to Israel itself. They reflected Yahweh's special commitment to Israel, of which Abel might be a kind of anticipation. But Genesis 18:21 and 19:13 also applied them to the cry of people oppressed in Sodom, making clear that God's care and God's listening extends beyond the people of promise. And 1 Samuel astonishes us by declaring that the words apply to the poor Philistines. They are the victims of God's hand, but their cry of pain and protest does not get stuck in Philistia. It goes up to heaven.

God cares about the people he attacks. The God of Israel is the God who cares for the people of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, as well as for all the victims of their oppression. This God is the sort who will send a prophet to warn them of the fate that awaits them and will jump at the chance to have a change of mind about their fate when they respond. There is a Jewish story about the angels jumping for joy at the Israelites' escape from the Red Sea. The story pictures God thinking about the Egyptians and not just about the Israelites: 'Are you rejoicing when all those children of mine are drowning in the sea?' It is 'just a story,' but it is of a piece with what the Old Testament says about Yahweh and the Ninevites and Yahweh and the Philistines.

How Do You Make Up for Offending Someone?

By the time seven months had passed, the Philistines had worked out that there were other things to do as well as cry out to God. They had to take some responsibility for the trouble they had got themselves into with Yahweh. So they called for the priests and the diviners and asked what they ought to do with Yahweh's chest. I wonder whether there is another irony here. It might have been nice if the Philistines' spiritual leaders had taken an initiative themselves in raising this question. Sometimes it takes the ordinary people to ask the question that the leadership is afraid to face.

But at least these spiritual leaders had an answer, and a good one (it turned out). Maybe there is yet another irony here, or another event that this story would remind people of. A couple of centuries later a Syrian king had a general who was ill, and an Israelite servant girl told him about resources for healing in her own country (see 2 Kings 5). The Syrian king sent his general to the Israelite king with a letter asking him if he could help. This puts the Israelite king into a state of panic. 'How am I supposed to know about healing people with incurable diseases? This is a trick. They are picking a fight with me.' He did not know about the resources for healing in his own kingdom. Often it was the case that the Israelites would offend Yahweh and not have the wit to see that they needed to do something about it. In contrast, the pagan priests and diviners knew what you needed to do when you had offended God.

Divination is forbidden to Israel because God has given Israel better ways of knowing what God wants or what God is saying. It is often scorned in the Old Testament, but it is not forbidden to peoples other than Israel who do not have the Torah and the prophets. It involves looking for signs in natural events, indications of the kind of thing that God approves or the kind of thing that God may be about to do. It is a sophisticated version of the principle that it is unlucky to walk under a ladder or to have a black cat cross your path, or that accidents happen in threes.

One way to express what is required now is that the Philistines need to start giving glory to the God of Israel (6:5). The implication is that they have the chance to restore something that has been lost. It is not so long since we read the dying, grieved declaration of Ichabod's mother about the glory having gone (4:22). Whose glory had gone, and how irreparably? The story left it at that. It told us no more. We can easily enough infer that Eli's glory had gone, and

his family's, and that of the shrine. But there was more. Israel's glory had gone, and so had Yahweh's. Who is to restore the glory? The Philistines have the opportunity to do so. No, the events at the end of chapter 4 were not the end of the story. It was not too late.

One can see how the priests and diviners might have worked out the answer to the people's question regarding what they needed to do about Yahweh's chest. The way the Philistines have treated this symbol of Yahweh's presence has evidently offended Yahweh. When you have offended someone, you have to try to make up for it in some way. You will need to say you are sorry, but you will probably need to do more than that. You will do something special to try to compensate for the offence. If you forgot your wife's birthday, giving her a special bunch of flowers as well as groveling and buying a regular present may be a good idea.

The film *An Ideal Husband* (almost) ends with a scene that implicitly provides an example. It is the story of a prominent politician who has a guilty secret that a blackmailer threatens to expose. In the end he resists the temptation to give the speech that the blackmailer requires. Indeed, he not only resists, but the speech he does give is a barnstorming one that works in the opposite direction. Implicitly he has taken an action that compensates for the one failure that mars an otherwise exemplary life.

When the Old Testament talks about a 'guilt offering', it is referring to a kind of offering that works like that. It is something that makes up for offending God. Send Yahweh's chest back to Yahweh's own land, then, say the priests and diviners, but in addition send an offering. Then Yahweh may stop attacking you and may heal you instead. The guilt offering is to be something valuable and something that corresponds to the offence. Let us say one gold model of a hemorrhoid and one gold model of a plague rat for each of the five Philistine cities and their mayors.

Once again the Israelites listening to this story snigger. Gold models of hemorrhoids and vermin! To add to the bathroom humour, the diviners point out that the number is five because the plague affected not only the ordinary people. Money and power did not protect you. You can relish the image of the five Philistine mayors queuing for the bathroom along with the other members of their families.

The humour continues in the exhortation that the priests and diviners add to their instruction, though it is a more subtle theological humour. 'Don't be hard-hearted', they urge. The 'heart' in the Old Testament is more often the organ you think with and make decisions with than the locus of your emotions, so we might render the expression 'Don't close your minds, don't be stubborn. Don't be like the Egyptians and Pharaoh. After Yahweh had made fools of them, didn't they let the people go?' In the course of the battle near Ebenezer, the Philistines have already been credited with some knowledge of the kind of power Yahweh showed in Egypt - including the power to bring about terrible plagues. Now their priests show that either they have been also talking to their counterparts in Egypt (an ally of the Philistines), or they have been to inter-faith meetings with the Israelites and heard them talking about their history, or they have read the Bible well for themselves. If the priests had had anything to do with it, this covenant chest would never have come anywhere near Philistia in the first place, but you can't get mayors and generals and armies to see sense until they are forced to. The Philistines may think that what has happened so far is bad, but they should read on in the exodus story. They had better cut their losses.

The situation is an inverted version of the situation in Egypt. This time it is not the people who need to be let go. It is their God. So let Yahweh go, with appropriate ceremony. Get a new carriage built and set the chest upon it in state, with the gold hemorrhoids and vermin alongside(!). Put two cows at the front to pull it, and set it off towards the nearest Israelite town, Beth

Shemesh, just inside the border of Israelite territory on the way up into the mountains. And watch for what happens.

There are two possibilities. It is not natural for two cows to want to go off like that, away from their calves. Perhaps the cows will refuse to budge. Or perhaps, against nature, they will march off towards Beth Shemesh. If they do that, it will mean Yahweh is making them act against nature and it will prove that we are right. It is Yahweh who has caused all this trouble. If they refuse to budge, it will indicate that Yahweh cannot make them ignore their instincts, and therefore that Yahweh can hardly be responsible for the plague. The plague must have been just one of those things. Pre-modern peoples do not have to assume that every strange event issues from the direct activity of the gods. They know there is such a thing as chance. Their difference from modern people is that they allow for both possibilities, instead of assuming that everything is a matter of chance.

The cows make a beeline for Beth Shemesh, lowing as they go: 'we don't want to go here, we want to go back home to our calves, but we know we have to go and do this first' (or perhaps they can guess how this story will end for them).

There are several stories in the Old Testament about animals having more spiritual insight than human beings, and these Philistine cows join Balaam's ass in that company.

So What Is Israel Supposed to Learn from This?

Being nearer the coastal plain where the Philistines live, the people of Beth Shemesh live in good farming country characterized by hills and vales rather than steep mountains. It is summer and the people are out in the fields reaping their wheat. Their jaws drop as they espy an extraordinary procession on its way from the no-go area of Philistine territory across the valley. The cows' slow pace gives them chance to discuss what on earth is going on. Is this some kind of a trick? They have just been reading about the Trojan Horse in the newspapers. But the Philistines have no need to be playing a trick on them. And what are the Famous Five Philistine Mayors doing with that reverent but anxious look on their faces as they follow the cows and the carriage from a respectful distance?

The people let joy overcome suspicion and eventually walk and then run to meet the carriage with its precious cargo. It reaches Israelite territory in the fields of a man called Joshua. It is nice touch, that: a namesake of the man who first brought Yahweh's chest into the land from the east welcomes it back from the west. The carriage becomes the wood for a fire and the poor cows become the raw material for a sacrifice and a rock in Joshua's field becomes a makeshift altar. To this day you can see the rock there, the narrator tells us. Joshua had no doubt cursed that rock a time or two. Large rocks are just what a farmer does not want in his wheat-field. Suddenly it gains a significance like that of the twelve rocks that the other Joshua set up after the covenant chest had completed that other dangerous crossing into Canaan, the rocks which commemorated something amazing that Yahweh did then. They had been put there 'so that all the peoples of the world may acknowledge that Yahweh's hand is mighty, and so that you may revere Yahweh forever' (Joshua 4:15-24). This rock comes to make the same point. The Famous Five indeed see and return home.

That ought to be the end of the story, but it has a solemn, unexpected footnote. Not everyone was glad to see the covenant chest return. Specifically, the descendants of one Jeconiah did not join in the celebration. Perhaps their father was one of the people who had been killed in that battle with the Philistines. Perhaps they were still grieving over the way Yahweh had let them be defeated. Perhaps they were not ready to do business with Yahweh yet.

There were other people in Beth Shemesh who had a different problem. Doubtless they had never seen Yahweh's covenant chest before, but they had heard about it, and they had always wondered what was actually inside it. Could you see Yahweh there? So they decided to have a look. And Yahweh killed seventy of them. 'Seventy, fifty thousand' the Hebrew text says, which does not make sense. The Greek version of the Old Testament simplifies the story and makes it a bit less theologically objectionable. The Greek translation sometimes does do that, and NRSV follows. We prefer the civilized attitudes of the Greeks.

No, I do not like this footnote to the story, but I suspect that it may be very important. Indeed, it might even be the point of the story. Remember, the ordinary Israelites in a place such as Beth Shemesh are the people for whom this story is written. Yes, they are entitled to laugh at the discomfort of the Philistines. But they need to remember that this is a very serious story, about how seriously Yahweh must be taken. If the Philistines cannot trifle with Yahweh, neither can the Israelites. Again one recalls that earlier story of Joshua and the ark, which closed in a way that seems surprising but now seems significant. That other Joshua had told the people that the aim of Yahweh's great actions was that the peoples of the world should acknowledge that Yahweh's hand is mighty, and that they themselves should revere Yahweh forever.

As the people of Beth Shemesh put it, 'Who can stand before Yahweh, this holy God?' Actually there are perfectly feasible answers to that question. Yahweh is indeed an awesome, mighty, transcendent God who cannot be trifled with. So the people who stand before this God need to be people who revere this God as God. But the people of Beth Shemesh are asking a purely rhetorical question. They just want to be rid of this dangerous covenant chest, if what they have seen is the kind of experience it brings. The worrying parallel between the Philistines and the Israelites continues as they ask for it to be transferred to someone else's backyard. 'To whom shall he go, so that we may be rid of him?'

The people of a little village called Kiriath Jearim, up the hill toward Jerusalem, are quick to volunteer to have the chest there, and they consecrate a man called Eleazar to look after it. It is a name that augurs well, the name borne by a son of Aaron himself. He should know how to look after a covenant chest.

So How Are We Supposed to Go About Fighting a Battle (We Know We Got it Wrong the First Time)?

Twenty years pass, a neither-one-thing-nor-the-other time. Yahweh's chest is back and it is being well looked after, but it sits in an obscure village as if it were in cold storage (Eslinger). The Philistines are still controlling the Israelites' destiny and eyeing their land. Further, religiously the Israelites are behaving the way they usually did through much of Old Testament times, hedging their bets by worshipping the Baals and the Astartes. These are those traditional gods of the land, attractive, homely gods. There are some male ones for the men and some female gods for the women (or was it the other way round?). They had those images you could see and they had ways of behaving that looked like mirror-images of yours, so that you could identify with them and feel that they identified with you. They lacked the austerity of Yahweh, reflected in Yahweh's prophet.

Perhaps the people came to realize that this was part of the problem. Your God needs to be enough like you for some mutual understanding to be possible, but if your God is just your mirror-image, what is the point (and are you not probably making him or her in your image?). If from time to time your God does some things that you would never do (as had happened at Beth Shemesh), perhaps that is as well. It may make it less likely that you have manufactured this God the same way you can manufacture an image.

For whatever reason, in due course the house of Israel 'lamented after Yahweh'. So the NRSV, though the margin confesses that the expression is an obscure one. But Samuel's reaction shows that at least it purports to indicate that the people are 'turning' to Yahweh (7:3).

'Turning' is the ordinary Hebrew word that gets translated 'repent'. It suggests two things about the nature of repentance. First, it is an action. Hebrew has a word for feeling sorry about something you have done (we will come across it in Saul's story). But more often 'repentance' denotes a change of behaviour. Specifically, it involves a change of direction. The people have turned away from Yahweh and have been looking to the Baals and the Astartes. They needed to do what the Philistines had done when their cry went up to heaven and they started treating Yahweh with due honour.

Samuel's response to their lamenting manifests a toughness that will turn out to be characteristic of him, but it seems that he says what needs to be said. 'If you are turning to Yahweh with your whole being and these laments are not just words and you're not just feeling a bit sorry for yourselves and may change your minds again if there is a bit of relief, then prove it. Turning to Yahweh means turning away from those other gods. A relationship with Yahweh has to be all or nothing.' And the people do put away those other deities.

When they have passed that test, Samuel invites them to a prayer meeting at Mizpah, where Israel had gathered in Judges 20-21. 'They drew water and poured it out before Yahweh'. Perhaps it was a symbol of pouring themselves out in prayer. They fasted, a symbol of taking this business really seriously and really meaning what they were doing. When you have something serious to you, you don't have time for sitting over long meals, and when you are overwhelmed by sadness, you don't have the inclination to eat. They acknowledged to Yahweh that they had failed in their commitment. And Samuel 'judged' them there (7:6).

Once again the story pushes the point along with great seriousness but then lightens it, turning to irony. Philistine intelligence hears about this prayer meeting at Mizpah, assumes it is really a gathering for battle, and urges a brisk mobilization of the Philistine army. This furthers the agenda of the prayer meeting with a speed that the people had not bargained for - you know how it is when God answers your prayer by doing just what you are not ready for. They wanted Yahweh to sort out the Philistines. Their very prayer meeting is the event that is to bring this about. Fasting and confession turns to fear and the plea, 'Do not give up praying for us. Pray that Yahweh may rescue us from the power of the Philistines'.

Once again prayer is not just a matter of words but of symbolic deeds. Samuel offers a lamb as a sacrifice, an expression of the people's dedication of themselves to Yahweh. Sacrifice and prayer naturally thus go together. Conversely, sacrifice is not just an outward act that you do by rote. You talk to Yahweh about what the sacrifice symbolizes. So as the smoke of the sacrifice ascends to Yahweh, Samuel is crying out to Yahweh on the people's behalf. 'And Yahweh answered him' (7:9). That may mean he had some sign or sense of God's response, though it may just be a way of referring to the implication of what happens next. At the very same moment as all this was happening, while Samuel was sacrificing and praying, the Philistines were attacking. The scene recalls the occasion in Exodus 17 when Amalek is attacking Israel and Joshua is leading the Israelite forces on the ground while Moses is directing them in heaven, his arms supported by Aaron and Hur. A sign in the context of the battle accompanies the sign in the context of worship. Out of the bright blue sky there is the sound of the loudest thunder the Philistines have ever heard, it paralyses them, and Israel only has to chase them away in confusion, defeat, and humiliation.

So Ebenezer becomes Ebenezer. On the assumption that this is the same place, it had been called 'Help Stone' in the story of that terrible defeat when the covenant chest was captured (4:1). Perhaps the name was used there because it

became the place's name later, or perhaps its old name now receives a new appropriateness, or perhaps this is actually a different place. Whichever is right, it draws our attention to the mirror-image relationship between the story of the two battles. The first one showed how not to fight a battle against overwhelming forces. This second one shows how to do so. More importantly, that one shows that a terrible defeat never needs to be the last word.

But Did All That Really Happen?

There is a question you may have been asking (and I have, whether you have been or not). Did all this really happen?

You may reckon that this is an illegitimate question because it is the Bible we are talking about. The Bible does not tell lies. I believe that. But the Bible does tell parables. Might this be a parable rather than a historical story? I do think that the Old Testament narratives mix history and parable rather than presenting straight history. This is not to imply that they mix truth and falsehood. Parable is just as true as history, and just as important. It makes it possible to say things that could be said in no other way. God inspires both.

Why should anyone think that this story is parable rather than history? The fact that it talks about God causing plague and death among Philistines and Israelites can offend us, but that is hardly a basis for saying that these events did not happen. One of the great things about the Old Testament is that it deals with life as it is, and plague and death are realities of life. If we would rather not say that God brought them about, that is a theological opinion not a basis for a decision about whether the story is a parable. If the story is a parable, the theology stays the same!

For me the aspect of the story that first raises the question is Dagon having his head and his hands cut off. It raises the question for two reasons, one good and one perhaps not-so-good. The reason that may be not-so-good is that I have never known God do anything like that. I do not assume that everything in scripture that goes beyond what I have experienced must be a parable. I do believe that Jesus was virgin-born and that he miraculously healed people and that he rose from the dead. But the evidence for those is more spectacular than the evidence for this event. On the other hand, I recognize that my experience is limited, and I suspect that God has done many amazing things that I have not seen. That is why it is a not-so-good reason. Further, I have less difficulty believing that God thundered supernaturally and paralyzed the Philistine army so that the Israelites found them easy to defeat, and I have not experienced God doing that, either.

The better reason is that the story of the covenant chest's adventures is such a funny story, and so larger-than-life. Larger-than-life humour is a characteristic of parables and not of history. So is the way the story ricochets from humour to seriousness, so that it gets under your skin by making you laugh and then puts the knife into your assumptions or your self-satisfaction. This is why the account of what happens at Beth Shemesh at the close of the story is so important.

Admittedly there are other ways in which the story seems to make a point of underlining its factual truth. There is the reference to Joshua's rock which people could still see in Beth-Shemesh. And I have an odd memory of my own. The first time we went to Israel, we stayed in Tel Aviv. On our third day there, we set off by car to drive up to Jerusalem. There was no freeway in those days, and we drove along ordinary roads. Eventually we came to a signpost to Beth-Shemesh. It was the first biblical name I had seen on a signpost. And I wept. Beth Shemesh was so real a place there was a signpost to it.

So maybe the story is parable, maybe it is history. Fortunately I do not think it matters too much. The way God wants to affect us by it is the same either way.

4

The Men Who Didn't Want to Be Responsible (1 Samuel 8 and 12)

I was once the Principal of a Theological College. I am not sure whether institutions like that have to have someone in charge. I would like to think that they do not, and that the same is true of churches and of secular communities. I would like to think that you could have a group of people who shared responsibility and decision-making. They might have an arrangement whereby a different member of the group was in charge each day of the week, or each week of the month, or even for a year at a time. The Pastor of a huge church in Buenos Aires told me the other day that his church did work with corporate responsibility like that. He could thus be in Los Angeles for several months without the church being obliged to stand still.

I have personal reasons for wanting to believe that group responsibility is the best kind of leadership. I sometimes found being in charge exhilarating and I sometimes found it burdensome. The latter of these looks the bigger problem, but I suspect the former is actually so. It is the bigger problem for the leader, and also for the led. It is a frightening experience (or it should be) to be led by someone who enjoys leading. It is also a frightening experience to be led by someone who does not enjoy leading. And for the leader, it is thus a devastatingly testing and a potentially destructive experience to lead, whether you enjoy it or not.

There are also theological reasons why I want to believe in group-leadership. It fits better with the way human beings are created. It is human beings together who were made in God's image and were designed to exercise leadership in the world. There was no hierarchy in the Garden of Eden. Hierarchies did develop, as an expression of human sin, and God worked with that. But the way the gospel movement started suggests God was hoping to go back to the original plan. The gospel movement had a group of twelve leaders and the New Testament assumes that churches will always have a group of leaders. There is no direct evidence that these groups ever had one supreme leader, a permanent chair. That developed after New Testament times. The reason for it was similar to the reason for the introduction of kingship in Israel. It was that things went wrong without it.

The trouble is that things go wrong with it, too. The account of the way Israel gets its first king is bracketed by two confrontations between the people and Samuel. In one Israel takes the initiative, in one Samuel does so, but both make this point.

Appoint Us a King (8:1-22)

Everyone lived happily ever after, for a while, after the great victory when Ebenezer lived up to its name, or earned it. Politically and religiously and socially things went well as the years of Samuel's leadership passed. But the story of that victory was also preparing us for the story of Saul. The victory and the years that followed showed that you could do perfectly well without a king. They showed that Yahweh's preferred way of resolving a crisis is to bring to the surface someone like Samuel who exercises moral and spiritual leadership

by getting on with preaching and praying, and leaves space for Yahweh to sort out the international affairs.

The trouble is, that is only half the story. Like Eli, Samuel got old. Like Eli, Samuel had two sons whom he inducted into his role. Like Eli's sons, they did not follow in their father's ways. Like Eli's, they were interested in looking after themselves rather than the people. There was a difference between the two pairs of sons, though it arose from the difference in their father's roles. Although Eli exercised some leadership in everyday life (he could be called a 'judge'), he was chiefly a minister. His sons followed him in his ministry in the cathedral, and their opportunity for self-indulgence therefore came in the realm of church affairs. Samuel was also a priest, but he spent more of his time exercising leadership in secular affairs. It was in this realm that his sons followed him, and in this realm that they took the opportunity for self-indulgence. They took bribes and perverted justice, as often happens. And whereas Eli tried to confront his sons about their behaviour, even if it was too little too late, we are told nothing of any such attempts on Samuel's part.

So the 'elders of Israel', the senior people in the community, evidently took the initiative and had a meeting to discuss what should be done about this (8:4). I would have liked to read that they then realized that there were two things they ought to do. One goes back to that victory at Ebenezer, which has shown them what to do in a crisis: gather the whole community, fast, pray, examine themselves.... Maybe Yahweh will do something again. The other realization might have been that they take some responsibility for the situation. They might confront the two judges and the mafia they had no doubt developed, and demand reforms. If they were convinced it really was too late, they might set going an impeachment process. They might set in place procedures that could safeguard against future abuse of power. They might decide from among themselves who was going to take up the tasks that the judges were not properly fulfilling. One of the neat things about a group of leaders is that it has the potential to include people of widely varying gifts, and among those elders there were surely people with the required energy and insight and courage.

But we all tend to be better at complaining than at doing something, better at demanding that someone do something than at doing it. Instead of accepting responsibility, with wondrous illogic the elders of Israel urge Samuel to set going the process for appointing a king to govern the community, such as every other nation has. They could, after all, point out that Deuteronomy allows for this, even if a little grudgingly and with an implicit warning of the down side (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

The Hebrew word for 'govern' is often rendered 'judge'. The first word better expresses what this person will do, though it could make us miss part of the significance of what the elders are asking. It is not that they have lacked people to 'govern' them. They have had the judges/governors of the Book of Judges like Deborah and Gideon, and more recently Eli and Samuel. What they are asking for is not government when they had none before, but a different form of government. The present form involves Yahweh producing a leader from time to time, though that person has no permanent position and the mode of government does not compromise the notion that the whole people is responsible to Yahweh. The point about a king is that he is a permanency and that he assumes that responsibility.

There is more than one irony here. One is that the calling of Israel was to model an alternative way of being a nation. God had promised so to bless Abraham that people would be amazed at what happened to the nation that grew from him and Sarah, that people would pray to be blessed as they were. Here are the elders of Israel praying to be blessed like the nations around. Israel's life so far has shown that you can do quite well without kings if you have

Yahweh as king, but the elders have lost the conviction that this can still work.

Another irony is that if leaders like Samuel's sons can pervert justice, one might have thought it was obvious that a king can do that even more efficiently. But what was the alternative? Actually the alternative is clear. They are the elders of Israel. They are the people who ought to be exercising responsibility for their community's destiny. But such 'ordinary' people also feel the ambivalence about leadership that I have found within myself. They want to be led, and they don't want to be led.

There is an interesting dynamic about Samuel's response to their urging. He has heard a tough speech. He has been told he is old; no-one likes being told that. He has been confronted about his sons; no-one likes that. And he has been offered a solution; sometimes we like that. Samuel ignores the jibe about his age, wisely since it was true, though no-one likes the implication that they are past it. He says nothing direct about the critique of his sons. Does he avoid referring to it? What had already been going on in his own mind and heart about it? Had he been avoiding it for years, like Eli? You can do little when your grown-up children choose to be different from what you yearn. Whatever he thought about his age and his parenting, what actually 'displeases' Samuel is the suggestion that Israel have a king. Part of that displeasure is no doubt the rejection of Samuel and his sons and the rejection of the form of leadership they have exercised. But what Samuel does is not react to the elders but pray.

Why and what did he pray? I have always assumed that he was asking for guidance as to how to respond to the people, I guess because guidance is what he gets in response to his prayer. I now realize that if that was what he was doing, one would have expected the ordinary word for 'ask' (as when Saul 'asks' God what to do in 14:37), not the technical term for prayer. That word implies that he is praying *for* them, as he did at Mizpah when Israel was in desperate need. He prays *for* them, despite or because of the fact that he is appalled at the elders' proposed solution to the nation's current problem. Unless he is praying *against* them, asking God to reject their request and punish them... (Miscall).

If Samuel's reaction to their plea is interesting, so is Yahweh's response to Samuel's prayer. There is a degree of incoherence about it, as if Yahweh is thrown by what has happened. Indeed Yahweh has been thrown by it. 'They have rejected me'. Being rejected does strange things to you. Specifically, having people find fault with your leadership does strange and contradictory things to you. It makes you feel angry and dejected. It makes you wonder why you bothered to put in all that effort when they spend their lives just sitting there. It makes you want to act decisively to prove them wrong, and it makes you wonder whether they are right and to wonder whether you could have done anything you did not do. It makes you now see things as worse than they are, overreacting from perhaps failing to face up to how serious they were. It makes you both want to push off and leave people to it, and to find some way of teaching them a lesson and letting them discover whether they could do better without you. I know it has that effect. I have been there.

Now Yahweh of course does not feel all that, but we know that Yahweh is someone with as strong and powerful feelings as we have. After all, ours are an imitation of Yahweh's. Yahweh is a person who feels love and jealousy and compassion and anger and pleasure and regret and longings and grief. When Samuel sensed Yahweh's response to his prayer, or the narrator sought to imagine what Yahweh would feel in response to Samuel's prayer, something of those reactions of a rejected human leader is what they sense. Yahweh speaks just as a rejected human leader would speak. 'Not only have they rejected me, but that is what they have been doing for two centuries'. And with delightful self-contradiction, within two sentences Yahweh both attempts to be the sole focus of

all this rejection ('they have not rejected you but me') and also acknowledges that they have rejected Samuel, too ('so also they are doing to you').

After the elders spoke with Samuel, there was no actual reference to a feeling of rejection on his part. I have implied that he must have felt something of that, but the story did not say so, and neither does Samuel when he talks to Yahweh about the situation. It is Yahweh who brings the subject out into the open, making explicit reference to the feeling that he implies Samuel knew inside himself.

Therefore (!), Yahweh says, do exactly what they ask. But tell them what it will be like (8:9). Of course Yahweh lacks the downsides to passion and can keep hurt and compassion in balance. Yahweh is not simply storming off and leaving them to the consequences of their desires. As the story makes explicit a little later, the point of telling them what having a king will be like is to jolt them to their senses and make them pull back. That fits with the regular point of prophecy. It is designed to falsify itself, to make people take the kind of action that will mean it does not come true.

So here is what a king will be like, says Samuel. The prophet does not need Yahweh to tell him. Any fool can work it out from looking at what happens in those other nations that Israel wishes to be like. First, he will take your children away. Your sons will fight in his army and work his farms and serve as his engineers (so there will be no father-and-son bonding as they work with you on your farm). Your daughters will look after the ladies in his palace and serve in its kitchens (so there will be no nice mother-and-daughter friendships developing in your kitchen). Actually you will not need them for that, because he will take away your best land and give it to his courtiers; oh, and your slaves and your best livestock, too. The tithes that on a good day you are glad to give to Yahweh as a sign of Yahweh's ownership of the whole land and Yahweh's goodness as the giver of the harvest and the growth in your flocks - they become taxes. The word for 'a tenth' is the same as the word for 'tithe' - the translations use a different word, which obscures Samuel's point. You will give the tithes to the king now, not take them to church. Or perhaps Samuel is warning them that they will have to give an extra tithe, a government tithe, so that they lose another ten per cent of what they grow? Indeed, Samuel goes on, you yourselves will become his slaves. And you will regret the moment you asked for a king, and will cry to Yahweh. And Yahweh will not answer you.

In Old Testament theological theory, Yahweh owns the land where Israel lives (and for that matter, where anyone else lives). Its people are free to live on the parcel of Yahweh's land that was allocated to each clan and each extended family. Each little community just has to grow enough crops to keep life going there. Life will be rural rather than urban, simple and unsophisticated. It will not generate great architecture or art or literature or music, and it will be vulnerable to the effects of the rains failing or to invasion by expansionist-minded neighbours. But it will be self-contained and self-sufficient.

The monarchic state will change all that. Samuel's picture is one that a political theorist of the Marxist persuasion has no difficulty recognizing. Israel remains basically a farming society and its people remain nominally free not slaves, but the state will behave in the way states do when they claim control of the land. As the story of Joseph shows, a state's bureaucratic system gives it the potential to mitigate the effects of natural calamities, but at the cost of enslaving its people. And as the stories of Saul and David show, a state has the potential to enable a people to defend itself against expansionist-minded neighbours. But its people have to pay for that, literally and metaphorically. They have to produce rather more than they themselves need, in order to keep the state going. And when they surrender authority to the state, its officials will not be able to resist the temptation to make life

rather more pleasant for themselves than it would otherwise be. So ordinary people have to work even harder to keep the system going.

Samuel's speech is like one of the more powerful speeches from Shakespeare. Not a word is wasted as its picture spans wider and wider and its screw is turned relentlessly tighter and tighter. 'You will be his slaves': surely that must be the climax. 'And you will cry out anguish': in other words, you are effectively back in bondage in Egypt. You have surrendered the freedom God gave you from there. And so you will cry out as you did there. But there Yahweh had responded to the people's cry - that was what led to the exodus. This time (Samuel goes on to that terrible coup de grace) Yahweh will not respond.

It is a shuddering warning, with a similar significance to the passage in Hebrews that talks about the possibility of finding no chance to repent (Hebrews 12:17). Like that passage, Samuel's warning has its strangely encouraging aspects. The whole point of it is to drag people back from the cliff edge. Samuel is pulling out all the stops in order to jolt people to their senses. Perhaps he exaggerates. When the chips are down, perhaps Yahweh would find it impossible not to listen to the people's cry. It will be the same as when Israel cried out in the first place in Egypt, when it took up the cry of Abel's blood and the cry of the oppressed in Sodom (Gen 4:10; 18:20-21; 19:13). If the Philistines' cry went up to heaven (1 Samuel 5:12), surely Israel's would. The outrageousness of the warning is another indication that Yahweh cares. The prodigal father is inclined to want to tell his son that he will never be welcome back. When he does that, it is pain talking. He is unlikely to be able to maintain the stance if the son does come back. But it would be unwise to presume on that. Samuel warns that decisions have consequences and may not be easily undone. Yahweh has other things to do than sit at the beck and call of every change of mind on the part of fickle Israel, which never knows what it wants.

The more chilling the close of Samuel's speech, the more chilling is the response. 'No, we are determined to have a king over us'. We want to be like everyone else, they reiterate. We want a king to govern us. We have had 'governors' - the word they use is that word usually translated 'judges'. That did not work. We want a different kind of government. But then they add something quite different. The reason for having this king is 'so that he can go out before us and fight our battles'. That brings out two issues that have not been quite explicit earlier. One is that it is all very well for the hand of Yahweh to have been against the Philistines throughout the time of Samuel (7:14): but what will happen when he is gone? Is God's activity bound to change when the human leadership changes? The way we often talk theologically, the answer might seem to be a clear 'No'. Yet we are used to the fact that when a great leader leaves an organization or a church, things often do go downhill. And that is a sign that God really does work through human capacities and gifts, not independently of them. So it is not so unreasonable to think forward about the national and military implications of the fact that Samuel is not as young as he once was.

The other feature of the way the issue is raised is that the words are now reported as coming on the lips of the people as a whole, who apparently stand behind the elders even if it is only the elders who are physically at the meeting. They do not want to fight their own battles. They want someone else to do it for them. Admittedly, they are also now a little confused. Do they want the king to go out before *them* - that is, as head of an army comprising their own able-bodied men about whom Samuel has spoken? Or do they really think that somehow he will conjure an army out of thin air and thus be able to fight instead of them?

The rejected God and the rejected prophet have done what they could. Yahweh commissions Samuel to appoint them a king and sends the meeting home. We await the next development.

It is another frightening yet encouraging fact that God lets us do stupid things. I have hinted that the story of the church in due course followed the same trajectory as Israel's. It started off with the abolition of kings and priests, which re-established the order of creation whereby there was no fixed patriarchal hierarchy. But we took less time than Israel did to re-establish hierarchy, so that each congregation sat under the authority of one person, and the pattern has been the near-universal one everywhere in the church ever since. And God has gone along with that. What would you have done if you were God? Flood them all and start again? Wait till a whole generation dies off and start again? Send your Son to die for them? Bathe them in your Holy Spirit? God has tried those.

`You and Your King' (12:1-25)

The story of Saul's designation as that first king follows. We will consider that in the next chapter. The other side of those events we get another resignation speech from Samuel. It is an odd feature of the stories of Samuel, Saul, and David that they are all beginnings and endings. The stories focus out of all proportion on how these men came to be in their position, and then on how they concluded it (Samuel) or how they lost it (Saul) or how their successor was determined (David). In Samuel's case, chapters 1-3 concerned his arrival, for chapters 4-6 he is missing, and by chapter 8 he is old and past it. But this does not stop him being a key player through the rest of the book, not least after he dies (see 1 Samuel 28). In California there is no compulsory retirement age and people pass 65 without noticing that they could now give up work. Cryogenics has not advanced far enough to enable them to keep on working after they die, though B. B. King, who still plays 300 gigs a year now he is in his seventies, has said that he intends to retire five or ten years after he dies. Samuel himself was not actually enthusiastic about working when he was dead. It is all very well people ringing you up at home to ask you a work question, but....

The moment Samuel chooses to resign is the moment Saul has been finally established in the kingship. Samuel has shown that he is committed to that: it is he who proposes the celebration where that kingship is confirmed (11:14-15). But one can imagine some mixed feelings about the event. He might have a sense of relief that he can reckon that his time is over, and a continuing sense of rejection at the fact that being led by a prophet-priest was not enough. He might have no desire not to be around to watch Saul do the job that is in a sense his job. His actual words express a defensiveness about his own conduct over the years, and offer an insensitive reminder that they will still have his sons after he is gone. It implies that he has not yet owned what kind of men his sons were (12:1-3). And of course like many a man in that position with those feelings, he will not really retire at all. He had not actually asked Yahweh whether he could retire, which was a strange omission as it was Yahweh who put him to work in the first place. Certainly Yahweh will soon be hauling him out of retirement and involving him in telling Saul that he is no good at the job and that his days are numbered.

On this occasion Samuel's usual testy sermon reminds the people again of what Yahweh has done for them over the years, but it does so in the context of telling them that he is entering into judgment with them. This is not the introduction to a praise party. Since they came into this land their story has been one of forgetting and forsaking. It is imperative that they get out of this pattern. They face a challenge like the one the people faced at the end of Joshua's life (Joshua 24). They have got to choose whether they and their king will follow Yahweh's way or not. To show that he is not making this up, Samuel calls on Yahweh for some thunder and rain, and Yahweh grants it. `And all the

people greatly revered Yahweh and Samuel' (12:18). Or perhaps it is, as the translations tend to put it, '... greatly feared Yahweh and Samuel'.

That phrase recalls their ancestors' collapsed response after passing through the Red Sea, when 'the people revered Yahweh and believed in Yahweh and in his servant Moses' (Exodus 14:31). Here there is no reference to believing, but the story goes on to refer to prayer, which implies some faith. They ask Samuel to pray for them, as he had done the first time they raised the question of kingship. The word they use is again the technical Hebrew word for 'pray', the word used of Samuel on that earlier occasion. The word comes much less often in the Old Testament than one might have expected. The Psalms refer to 'praying' very infrequently, but then they are actually doing it. It is then noteworthy that 1 Samuel 1-8 has been a narrative full of references to people 'praying'. The word will almost disappear through the succeeding stories of Saul and David and Solomon (except at 2 Samuel 7:27) until we come to the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8. That seems a telling fact - even though there will be some 'asking', using that everyday word rather than the word for 'pray'. 'Praying' is what you do in desperate need, whether it is Hannah desperate about her childlessness or Samuel desperate about the people's request for a king or the people desperate about having done wrong.

The reference to prayer suggests that the people are at last doing the right thing. They need Samuel to pray for them because they recognize the force in what he has said. To be fair to them, one wonders whether they might have done so if he had tried this speech earlier. When the elders raised the question of a king, he was perhaps too busy feeling rejected and checking out whether God felt the same, and then warning them about what kings were like. Only now has he driven them to focus on what their request implies about them and God. Their response implies that they are prepared to think again. They acknowledge that it was wrong to want a king. So kingship has now become something that nobody really wants (Jobling, p. 60): Samuel, Yahweh, or the people who asked for it.

It is too late for such second thoughts, but not just in a negative sense. 'Do not be afraid', he says. They are the gentlest words of his tough ministry. The fact that they have rejected Yahweh does not mean that Yahweh has forsaken them or will forsake them. Yahweh discovered near the beginning of the human story that it was no good making human responsiveness the key to whether the world would work. 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth', Yahweh said (Genesis 8:21). That is the NRSV's literal translation. The NIV rewrites this text because it cannot believe the logic. Yahweh made the same discovery near the beginning of the story of the covenant relationship with Israel (Exodus 32), and has kept confirming it. As I have noted, the pattern continues in the history of the church.

This does not stop Yahweh threatening to forsake the people, like a mother desperate for some way of getting through her children's thick skulls. Nor does it stop Yahweh actually abandoning the people for a while (e.g. Isaiah 54:7), like a mother walking out on her children to go and sit in the park for half an hour while she cools down and they have chance to come to their senses.

But it will stop Yahweh ever finally casting them off. There is no point. Indeed, it is too late for that, too. Yahweh has entered into a relationship with them, and relationships impose obligations on you. You cannot go back on the relationship and be true to yourself. To put it Samuel's way, Yahweh 'will not cast off his people, for his great name's sake, because it had pleased Yahweh to make you a people for himself' (12:22). Yahweh is too personally committed to be able to do it. That is our profoundest security.

Of course a prophet like Samuel is not going to take any risks with a statement like that. It is hedged about by warnings. It is a commitment that

can only be claimed by people taking the stance they have just taken, people who have seen their mistakes and have made a commitment to walking the right way.

The last piece of good news and the gentlest thing but one that Samuel ever says to them is 'far be it from me that I should sin against Yahweh by ceasing to pray for you'. It is a backhanded promise. It is not for their sake but for his own and Yahweh's that he makes this commitment. It is involved in being a prophet: a prophet is someone who stands between God and people representing each to the other. Yet perhaps the backhanded way of making the commitment is in a way their security. It is not merely for their sake, but for his and for Yahweh's that he will fulfil his commitment.

Samuel could not give up praying for them without failing to be true to himself. A prophet is a person in that impossibly exposed position, standing between heaven and earth, belonging to both and therefore belonging to neither. A prophet is someone allowed to know what is going on between God and the world, so as to be able to tell the world how God looks at it and what God intends to do with it and what it ought to be doing in relation to God. Usually that involves saying 'You mustn't do that, you must change your ways' (see e.g. Amos 5:4-7). But a prophet is also someone who is therefore in a position to take the initiative with God in discussions about what should go on in the world. Usually that also involves saying 'You mustn't do that, you must change your ways' (see e.g. Amos 7:1-6). A prophet is identified with God but also identified with the world. 'Far be it from me that I should fail Yahweh by ceasing to pray for you. And I will teach you in the way of life that is good and upright' (12:23). Both halves of the identification are there.

As a prophet you can only be yourself by maintaining both halves of this uncomfortable identification. It is an ultimately isolated calling. Perhaps it helps if you are the tough, austere person that Samuel was. If you have not been made that kind of person by being (say) given up by your mother when you were a child, then the calling itself may make you that kind of person in order to cope with it.

5

The Brown-eyed Handsome Man (1 Samuel 9-11)

After that opening confrontation about whether a king should be appointed (1 Samuel 8), the political and religious drama of the scene between the elders and Samuel and Yahweh disappeared for a while. The story continued, but the question that now had to be handled was, If there is to be a king, who is it to be? To tell us that, there was a dramatic change of scene and change of pace. The answer involved lost donkeys, a man hiding among the baggage, and a dramatic end for a yoke of oxen.

A Tale of Lost Donkeys (1 Samuel 9:1-10:16)

Abruptly we find ourselves in the midst of a family crisis that has nothing to do with great affairs of church and state - at least, not at first. As was the case with Hannah's story, however, we will find that a characteristic way in which Yahweh works is by becoming involved in the ordinary crises in someone's life in such a way as to interweave them with the aims Yahweh wants to achieve.

Samuel and Yahweh also disappear for a chapter or two, though that is only the way the story is told. It has its setting in activities in which Samuel is involved and in which Yahweh is preparing the way for what will happen between

Saul and Samuel and Yahweh. But the camera turns right away from them for quite a while and focuses resolutely on Saul and the details of this domestic (or business) crisis. Perhaps one reason is hinted by the end of the account of that scene between the elders and Samuel and Yahweh. The elders are set on having a king, Samuel is set on their not having one, and Yahweh is looking for a compromise. So Yahweh ends up telling Samuel to appoint them a king, but Samuel ends up telling them all to go home instead (8:22). If Yahweh is to turn Samuel into a king-maker, he may need to find an indirect way of working on him.

We are first introduced to Saul's father. He is a man called Kish, a man with a pedigree, a man of wealth, and a man who has the tallest, best-looking son in town. What makes a man a man? Well, position, wealth, and good looks put you on the right road. This is a worrying assumption. Yahweh is not the kind of person to reckon that these are the qualifications for being appointed to any job, as will soon be pointed out (16:7). Is Yahweh indeed simply colluding with the people's own desires and instincts (Eslinger)?

The crisis comes from the fact that Kish's donkeys have disappeared. This is a serious matter. A family's donkeys were the equivalent to its car and its pick-up. They were the means whereby you avoided having to walk everywhere and were able to transport anything. It is very odd that they were able to stray. It looks as if God is once again manifesting a predilection for using donkeys (see Numbers 22:22-35) as well as cows (see 1 Samuel 6). This might be worth bearing in mind as we drive our cars and our pick-ups, if they are our equivalents.

Kish gets Saul to take one of their workers and go and find the donkeys. This turns out to be a more complicated task than they thought. Indeed, the donkeys found themselves in due course, which also looks suspicious. For in this down-to-earth experience a key motif of Saul's story is announced. The wealthy, handsome Saul, who is to become the famous, powerful Saul, is never quite in control of his destiny. He is always being pushed this way and that by people and events that are mysteriously bigger than he is. He will become a spectacular victor in battle, but also a spectacular victim in the way life seems to work. He will never again be quite in control of his own life.

Saul and the boy traipse a considerable distance over three days (we discover the time frame later) and get nowhere, and Saul reckons it is time to go home. Perhaps he believed in our family's rule, that when you have lost something, you find it only when you are not looking for it. If so, he will turn out to be right. Or perhaps he is assuming that by now the donkeys will have been resprayed and sold across the Jordan with their chassis numbers scratched out, or taken apart and used for spares (donkey curry, anyone?).

Everything that happens in the future issues from a suggestion that now comes from the boy with Saul whose name we are not even told. He reminds us a little of the girl with no name who knows where to find a prophet with a gift of healing for a Syrian general (1 Kings 5). In both these stories people with no name somehow know where the religious resources are, as people of position or power do not. Saul's boy has heard of a prophet with a gift of knowledge in the nearby town. Actually this is not so surprising for us as readers, for they are in Zuph, and we already know that Zuph is where Samuel's family came from, and we know that Samuel has a gift of knowledge.

It seems a shame to give up and go home without having this one last shot at finding the wretched donkeys. The boy will not be put off by Saul's fear that you cannot ask for a word of knowledge without being able to pay for it. Is this more evidence that Saul may have stood physically taller than everyone else, but did not do so in other ways? There is no other evidence in the Old Testament that you had to pay for the services of a prophet. The exception is again the Balaam story (Numbers 22-24). There king Balak hires the seer because he wants him to use his gift of cursing, but finds that he cannot escape using his gift of blessing instead. Fortunately, though this adds to Saul's

humiliation, the boy has brought his credit card, though we never read of him using it.

He actually describes this prophet as a 'man of God', though the storyteller goes on to provide us with a footnote that presupposes that he is a 'seer' and then tells us that before the storyteller's day that was what you called a 'prophet' (1 Samuel 9:9). To us, 'man of God' or 'woman of God' suggests someone who stands out for their devotion to God, but in the Old Testament it means someone who has supernatural gifts. The word for 'seer' suggests someone who 'sees' things that other people do not. That is true in Hebrew as it is in English. We do not know what was the original meaning of the Hebrew word translated 'prophet', but it came to mean someone who brought a word from God.

So they climb up the hill to the town. Towns were regularly built on hills because that made them easier to defend when war came. Unfortunately this meant you had to walk to the bottom of the hill to get water, because that is where springs tend to be. So Saul and the boy meet some girls who are on their way to fetch water. If the town-planners had been women, the town would have been at the bottom of the hill even if it did make it easier to defend. The girls tell the two of them that the people are expecting the seer at the shrine any minute. They are waiting for him to arrive to say grace before they eat.

It is a story told with wondrous subtlety. Why all that detail? Not a word is wasted. But it will be a while until we see how. Failing to wait for Samuel to arrive will eventually be Saul's first mistake (1 Samuel 15). For it is Samuel who is the unnamed man of God/seer/prophet. And Samuel is not at all surprised to see Saul, because Yahweh has told him that a young man like this is coming. Yes, Yahweh has been involved in the loss of the donkeys and the fruitless search - or at least, Yahweh intends to use this collocation of events. 'You are to anoint him to be leader over my people Israel. He will deliver my people from the power of the Philistines... for their cry has come to me' (9:16).

Every clause in Yahweh's statement deserves noting. We know that someday there is to be an 'anointed' ruling in Israel. Samuel's mother had sung about him (2:10). In chapter one we noted how she had spoken of her own son as one 'asked' from Yahweh (*sha'ul*) and then 'lent' to Yahweh (*sha'ul*; see 1:27-28, where forms of this word come four times). Samuel, the man who was *sha'ul* by designation, meets the man who was *sha'ul* by name. There is therefore some irony about the fact that Samuel no more knows Saul by name than Saul knows Samuel's name.

This man is to be 'leader' over Israel. Hannah had spoken of him as king, but here Yahweh does not, and this points to a subtle relationship between Yahweh's words here and in the earlier confrontation between God and prophet and people. Yahweh wants to be Israel's king and is offended at Israel's desire to have another king who will do a better job of ruling the people. Of course Yahweh has used human agents as governors, the people usually known as 'judges', but Israel no longer views that as enough. Yahweh does not like the idea of kings; Israel is not satisfied with the idea of governors. When two parties are in conflict, the way forward may involve compromise and new forms of words both parties can accept, and Yahweh here invents a new word to try to find a compromise. Unfortunately the Hebrew word for 'leader' does not have a verb to go with it, so Yahweh has to invent another word to describe what this ruler will do - or rather, has to stretch the meaning of an existent word. It is an interesting one. This 'leader' will 'control' my people (9:17) might be the best way to put it: the word usually means 'restrain'. We know that this people need some control and restraint.

Yet what Yahweh directly notes to Samuel is more a concern about them than a continuing impatience with them. 'He will deliver my people from the power of the Philistines'. Yahweh recognizes the force of their concern about what will happen now that Samuel is getting old. 'Their cry has come to me'. It is a

lovely observation. Only a page ago Samuel had warned them that a day might come when they would cry to Yahweh but their cry would not be heard or heeded. That was a warning about the future and this statement does not contradict it, though it does raise the question whether Samuel was being tougher than Yahweh meant. After all, he was told to tell them what kings were like, not what Yahweh would be like later. And/or it is a reminder that Yahweh tends to talk tough but has a harder time being tough. Whichever way, the divine concern here contrasts with the divine toughness of the previous chapter and reminds us that both are part of God. The cry of the people of God continues to reach God's ears, even when they have no business to be crying that way or no business to be in the position that makes them cry that way. The people of God are no less privileged than the Philistines whose cry went up to heaven.

Saul's boy has been right beyond his wildest dreams about Samuel's gift of knowledge. Samuel has had Yahweh reveal all this to him, and when Saul appears, he knows this is the person Yahweh was talking about. Saul's contrasting lack of insight stands out as he walks up to the seer without knowing that it is him, and asks where the seer's house is. He gets more than he bargained for. To begin with, he gets an invitation to dinner and the offer of a bed and a promise that before he leaves the next day 'I will tell you all that is on your mind'. Ah, he will be able to tell Saul about the donkeys, we perhaps infer. Yes, the boy was right. Samuel indeed has a gift of knowledge. Well, yes, he will. Indeed he tells him now: the donkeys have been found and there is no need to worry about them. So what else is on Saul's mind that Samuel will tell him tomorrow?

It is another sign that Saul is not the only person who is being manipulated in this story. We are. We did not know that Saul had anything but donkeys on his mind. We assumed that we had been told all that Yahweh had revealed to Samuel. But there was evidently more. There is something that the storyteller knows about and Saul knows about and Samuel knows about that we do not know about.

In the broader context of this story, after the argument about having a king in the previous chapter, we might have taken Samuel's statement as a hint that Saul himself has been thinking about the leadership of Israel and fancying his chances. That may be true, and the storyteller never makes explicit what Samuel was referring to. But then at this first meeting, as Saul and we reel in astonishment at each sentence that emerges from Samuel's mouth, one of these sentences already concerns that matter of the kingship: 'On whom is all Israel's desire fixed, if not on you and on all your ancestral house?' (9:20). This question implies that it is not in itself the kingship that Samuel wants to postpone talking about until the morning, for he is already talking about that tonight, too.

His question is a typically ambiguous one. The only time a phrase such as 'the desire of Israel' recurs in the Bible, it will imply 'the treasure of Israel' (see Haggai 2:7). So is Samuel promising all Israel's riches to Saul? That fits well with the content of 8:11-17 (a king will take the best of your fields and vineyards...), but it would be extraordinary to find that warning now dangled as a carrot before Saul. More likely Saul is the object of the people's desire. And perhaps Samuel is speaking anticipatorily of the way the people will come to want Saul as king. But the more obvious meaning is the one NRSV and NIV find. It is another indication that (like Saul) we do not know everything that is going on. We knew that Saul stood head and shoulders above everyone else, but we did not know that the people were therefore mentally grooming him for the throne. The worrying implication is that the people are clueless about the criteria that need to be used when choosing a king. It is also that Yahweh and Samuel are colluding with them regarding who they think would make a good king as well as in entertaining the idea of having a king at

all. Saul characteristically misses that subtlety in Samuel's words, and only hears himself identified as king-designate.

He does know how you are supposed to respond in a situation like this. His mother has told him the stories about Moses and Gideon. So he answers with the due humility ('Me, an obscure Benjaminite?'). He may not have been simply going through the motions and concealing secret hopes. This is the man who will later hide among the baggage, and not everyone will be thrilled when he is in due course chosen as the one to be king (10:27).

Still reeling, and apparently unwashed, Saul is conducted into the hall and finds himself guest of honour at a ceremonial dinner. After the dinner they go to the service and then come back to sleep. The guest-room is on the roof. Dawn comes, the time when you do something if you are really committed to doing it. Samuel tells Saul it is time to get ready to leave. He goes with him to the edge of the town and then has the boy sent on ahead so that he can tell Saul in private what Yahweh is saying.

We have noted that the chapter divisions in the Bible often come at odd places, and the end of chapter 9 is an example. At the same time from a dramatic viewpoint it is inserted with some genius, like the one at the end of chapter 5. On this occasion the English chapter division does follow the Hebrew one. We draw breath to hear what Samuel will say at this arresting moment. In keeping with Yahweh's word, Samuel pours oil over Saul's head. He kisses him. It is the first extra-familial kiss in the Bible: 'hugged' might give us the right impression of affection and acceptance and identification. He tells him that Yahweh has anointed him as leader over the people. The pouring of oil is a sacrament.

In the NRSV and the NIV margin a long statement about reigning over Israel and delivering them from their enemies follows, though both translations note that this statement is only in the Greek and Latin versions of the Old Testament, not in the Hebrew. I have mentioned that the Hebrew text of Samuel is in a poor state, and in this case it is easy to see how a scribe's eye could have jumped from one reference to being 'leader' to the next, and missed out several lines. The effect in the Hebrew text as we have it is to highlight a particular feature of Samuel's words. It is a feature that is also there in the Greek and Latin text though it is less marked. Samuel's long address to Saul is mostly about signs and promises, not about being king. And I wonder whether this suggests the nature of the question on Saul's own mind, the matter Samuel had refrained from speaking about last evening.

When the charismatic movement happened in Britain, I found my way into it rather gradually, in the way some people find their way into Christian faith gradually and cannot name a day when they were converted. For a long time I was then not sure I really belonged there. I had not had the tumultuous experiences of being 'baptized in the Spirit' that other people had had, nor did I think God spoke to or through me as happened to and through other people. Eventually it was the combination of being treated as if I belonged by people who were certainly 'inside' and having my own little experiences of being used by God that changed that. And that gave me more confidence about following my spiritual hunches, though I recognize the need to keep remembering the two-thirds rule. Only one-third of pictures, prophecies, etc are worth uttering, but better risk uttering the other two-thirds than miss the one-third.

One should hardly fault Saul if he had doubts regarding whether he had what it took to be the means of God's purpose being effected for Israel. So having promised he would tell Saul all that was on Saul's own mind, and having already given him a big hint about the kingship, what Samuel focuses on here is the signs that Saul will receive. He will meet two people in a certain place and they will tell him the donkeys have returned home as mysteriously as they disappeared. He will meet three more people at another place and they will give him two loaves. At yet another place he will meet a music group on their way

home from church after a midweek service, and a ministry team singing in tongues - well, it is something more like that than 'prophesying' (NIV) or 'in a prophetic frenzy' (NRSV). Saul will find that Yahweh's spirit comes on him too. He will join in. And he will be turned into a different person. Actually, even before he leaves, God will give him a different heart. This sequence of experiences will provide the guarantees and the evidences that God is with him.

Samuel adds two footnotes in connection with all this. Both are a little strange, and they are even stranger when juxtaposed. When those signs that he has promised come about - the news about the donkeys, the gift of bread, the singing in tongues - Samuel tells Saul to 'do for yourself what your hand finds, for God is with you' (10:7). 'God is with you' or 'God will be with you' is as encouraging a promise as God ever gives anyone. It always implies not merely an inner sense of God being there, but outward visible manifestations of God's presence in action that mean powerful rulers bow and seas part and fires are quenched and sick people recover and pagans become disciples.

The commission that accompanies this promise is also encouraging, but it is the element in Samuel's first footnote that is strange. Its open-endedness is extraordinary. 'Do for yourself whatever your hand finds', it says literally. Saul can do what he has to do. The NRSV has 'do whatever you see fit to do'. That may make Samuel give Saul broader permission than he does, though it brings out the openness about the phrase. But how will Saul know what are the kinds of things the promise gives him encouragement to do?

The other footnote tells Saul to go down into the Jordan valley to Gilgal, another of Israel's worship centres like Mizpah. Saul is to wait there for seven days for Samuel to come to lead worship. It would be then that Samuel would show Saul what to do (10:8). Why is Saul to go down all the way to Gilgal? What is wrong with Mizpah or Ramah? And why must he wait for Samuel for a week? Is this just to show who is boss? If so, what was the point of the first footnote? What is the relationship between 'Do for yourself what your hand finds' and 'I will show you what to do'? Is Saul being encouraged to have the confidence to be a decisive leader, or is he not? This is a theoretical question at the moment. When the seven days at Gilgal expire, it will be a pressing, life-or-death one. For all the signs and guarantees, there is a catch or a safeguard, according to how you look at it. Saul has the background and will have the gifts to be a leader, but does he have the freedom to exercise the gifts and can he be the person?

I have never been in charge of a church, and I have often thought that I could not fulfil the demands of such a formidable job. But I have always accompanied that thought with the further one, that I could do as good a job of it as most of the people I see attempting it. Perhaps Saul had said 'Well, I have as much of what it takes to lead this nation as anyone has' but also 'But I am not sure I could do it' or 'But I would need to know that Yahweh willed it' or 'But I would need other people to know that Yahweh willed it' or 'But I would need Yahweh to be with me'. If so, what now happens begins to satisfy Saul's 'buts'.

Yet it does so in a way that is at least puzzling and probably also somewhat disturbing and threatening. What does it mean to be 'given a different heart' or 'turned into a different person'? The verb for the turning of the heart or the person into something different is the same both times, and it is one that usually refers to turning bad or overturning or turning upside-down. The previous occasion when it appeared in this book, it denoted the way labour pains overwhelmed Eli's daughter-in-law (4:19). The tortured Saul of later chapters will indeed have been turned into a different man, given a different heart.

What does it mean to be turned into a different person or given a different heart in a more positive sense? I have often heard people talk about the way God totally changed them or totally changed their life, but I have not usually believed it, except in the case of a man who had murdered seventeen people.

After all, God made us as the personalities we are, and in this sense presumably God likes us as we are, whether we are clear-headed or warm-hearted or decisive or sensitive or strong-willed or broad-minded. Not many people are all of these, and God likes the configuration we are and uses us as we are. Come to think of it, this even applies to my friend the murderer. Within scripture one can see key people with key weaknesses like Jacob and David and Peter keeping their personality configurations all through and never losing their weaknesses. God does not transform Jacob or David or Peter, in that sense. To judge from what will follow, neither did God transform Saul.

At the same time, when God gets involved in a person's life in a new way, that can change them dramatically so that their personality has a new configuration. I have a friend whose whole way of thinking and making decisions was extremely linear and whose expectations of everyone else was that their way of thinking should be the same. He was quite intolerant of anything else. Then the Holy Spirit got to work on him and he became as likely as anyone in our fellowship to be the one with a picture in his head that came from God for us, or to have the interpretation of some picture that came to someone else. He lost none of the rigorous linearity that characterized him in other circumstances, including his preaching, but quite suddenly he became more multifaceted as a person, more rounded out.

Something a little like that now happens to Saul. He was a person with assets in his background, wealth, and personal impressiveness, but with fewer clues about God than his servant had and no conviction that a destiny lay ahead of him. Now something happens inside him. The 'heart' is equivalent in our talk to the 'mind'. It is more the organ you think with than the one you feel with (in Hebrew it is your guts that you feel with). It suggests attitude. The story does not tell us that the result of his experience is that Saul came to believe Yahweh some more. But I wonder whether it was something like this that came about through Yahweh's words to him and through seeing Yahweh's words come true as all those 'signs' came about. Saul finds himself among the people singing in the Spirit, and it is no doubt rather a wonder to him.

On the other hand, there may be no reason to think that he will particularly welcome this experience any more than everybody else will approve of it. We may be inclined to think that traditional cultures like Old Testament Israel were more enthusiastic about weird manifestations of uncontrollable religious enthusiasm than ours. But there is no doubt that the second time people comment incredulously when this happens to Saul, they are looking down on it (19:24). And there is little reason to take their words on this first occasion as describing it as an experience to be admired and coveted that adds to Saul's stock. You can imagine good orthodox Israelites (if there were any) reckoning it as a bit too Canaanite. It will be only a few verses before some people are asking whether this is the type of man you want as your king (10:27).

Meanwhile Saul goes home and tells the story about the donkeys. The rest of what Samuel had said he keeps to himself.

A Man Who Hides Among the Baggage (10:17-27a)

There is a puzzling aspect of these stories about Saul and the beginning of the monarchy. They do not read as if their authors originally designed them for reading end to end. The chapter about the confrontation between Samuel and the people in chapter 8 has a coherence of its own, but the story of Saul and the donkeys in 9:1-10:16 has no link with it. In turn the story we are about to read does not seem to link back with the tale about the donkeys. The same unevenness will continue as we carry on reading.

Now sometimes films deliberately go in for a jumpiness of this kind, and it may be that the author meant the chapters to work like that to leave us to

figure out how to fit the individual episodes together. But the results of that effort sometimes seem tortuous. They cannot undo the oddness of the 'changed' Saul hiding among the baggage and the fact that we are later given that other account of why people used to comment on Saul's being among the people who sang in the Spirit. It may be more likely that a series of separate stories about Saul have been woven together, so that we sometimes need to forget aspects of a previous one in reading the next one. The situation is similar to one that arises elsewhere in scripture - for instance, with the two creation stories and the two accounts of God's appearing to Moses. What the two stories may do is reinforce each other and complement each other.

So let us forget the donkeys for a moment and go back to the episode that had Israel wanting a king and thereby rejecting God as their king. Samuel now summons the whole people to a meeting at Mizpah. Presumably it could have been elsewhere. The meeting with the elders had been at Ramah. Perhaps this time they needed a place with a bigger convention centre, but another meeting at Mizpah will recall the last meeting there (7:5-11), when they prayed and fasted and confessed and sacrificed and Yahweh thundered and the Philistines collapsed. This time Yahweh initially thunders again via Samuel, reminding them of the paradox in what happened at Ramah. Yahweh had enabled them to escape from Egypt and had delivered them from subsequent oppressors, but they have now rejected Yahweh and said they want a king. This is rather an unsympathetic read of the reasons for their request, of course. There is no mention here of the fact that Samuel's own sons are part of the reason why the people might feel they had a right to *something* by way of action.

'Now therefore present yourself before Yahweh by your tribes and by your clans', says Samuel. It is a frightening moment. To begin with, 'now therefore' is an expression with worrying associations. When a prophet tells people they are in deep trouble with Yahweh and are about to have the axe fall on them, 'now therefore' is the expression that sometimes comes between the two halves of this warning, the condemnation and the sentence (see e.g. Jeremiah 7:13; 18:11). The first two 'now therefore's in the Bible come in Genesis 3:22 and 4:11. To make it much worse, there was a previous occasion when the people were summoned to gather before Yahweh tribe by tribe and clan by clan to have someone identified. It was the occasion when they needed to identify who had caused the defeat that had happened just down the road from Mizpah at Ai, which led to the death of Achan and his family. Is Yahweh on the investigative path again, determined to find the sources of the people's rejection?

When the investigation takes place, Saul is missing. He is hiding among the baggage. Is the implication of his hiding that he knows about Jotham's parable and has listened to Samuel declaring that kingship is an expression of rejection of Yahweh? Given that, who would want to be king? When we read this story as it stands following the story about the donkeys, and if Saul had been fancying the idea of being king, it could well seem that hiding was just the thing to do. Had God smoked Saul out in the affair about the donkeys in order now to expose him publicly and bring down the axe? Or does the hiding repeat the point that he made to Samuel, that although he stands taller than anyone else in Israel, he cannot see himself as king? There were some rebels who never believed Saul would be any good (10:27). Were they the most perceptive people present? And if so, to judge from what follows, was he absolutely right to prefer a quiet life at home doing things like wander about looking for lost donkeys? Or does he have to trust Yahweh's capacity to see beyond the outward person to the inner potential (16:7)? The hiding also again makes the point that Saul himself is not too perceptive a person. He resembles a child hiding from its parents when it has done wrong. You know you will be found. But then what else can you do?

The people gather before Yahweh and they draw lots. Among the tribes, Benjamin is identified. Within Benjamin, the Matrites are identified. Within the Matrites, Saul is identified. Evidently the process worked by considering

names rather than by physically bringing a group of people forward, because Saul was identified even though he was not there. And then the place where he was hiding is similarly identified. Perhaps what happened was that each time they gave Yahweh a list of options and drew lots to see which was the right one. Saul is hauled into the centre of the assembly and every eye fixes on him as it once had on Achan.

It transpires that this was a different kind of 'now therefore', or at least a half-different one. Again it is sometimes so in the prophets. There are some wonderful passages where the prophet goes in for a lengthy indictment of Israel, then there comes a transition with a 'now therefore', and the audience steels itself or cowers. But instead of the headmaster's stick falling, the audience hears God going on 'now listen to me tell you about the way I am going to restore you' (see Isaiah 42:18-43:7; 43:22-44:5 - the words 'but now' are a different translation of the expression translated 'now therefore' here). The people have rejected Yahweh and said they wanted a king. So Yahweh is letting them have a king, and choosing this tall, brown-eyed handsome man.

In a class this week we have been studying Genesis 1-11, and students have been reading through the chapters in preparation. One of them said in the class, 'You know, I always thought God was rather punitive, especially in the Old Testament, but as I read through Genesis 1-11 it seems that God was more frustrated and grieved than angry at the way things turned out. Is that right?' That seems exactly right, and right for 1 Samuel too. Like God's various acts in Genesis 1-11, the designation of Saul as king is an act of mercy and grace, and an act that will stop things becoming worse than they otherwise might. But it is also an act that will make things worse than they might have been if the people had made different choices, and perhaps even than if Yahweh had made different choices.

The very word 'choose' expresses part of the point. Before 1 Samuel, Yahweh has done a lot of choosing, but the object of Yahweh's choice was usually the people as a whole. It is a step backwards when Yahweh's choice has to get focused on one man among them. At least Yahweh did choose the king rather than refusing to be involved in the process. But it is a shame that Yahweh does have to choose a king. Further, back in Deuteronomy the talk of choosing emphasizes the fact that God does not choose on the basis of who will be best for the job. It is almost the opposite, as if God chooses Israel because it is not very impressive, not very insightful, and not very moral, in order to show that anything that happens comes from God not from its natural ability. Is it the same with Saul, this man whose height seems to be his main qualification for the job?

A Tale of a Yoke of Oxen (10:27b-11:15)

Again the story comes to a close and a whole new episode opens that seems not to follow very logically on the last (though it follows quite well on the last-but-one). In a moment Saul will be out ploughing, an odd occupation for a man whom the people have just acclaimed with a 'long live the king'. But it makes another contribution to the portrayal of the process whereby Saul becomes king, and to the portrayal of Saul himself and how Yahweh relates to him.

After everyone had saluted Saul as king, Samuel had sent them all off home again, including Saul. This itself may seem rather odd. At least you might expect Saul to set about moving his filing cabinets into the palace. But of course there was no palace, nor any filing cabinets, nor any papers the king had to sign each day to keep the state administration going, nor any state visits from the king of Ethiopia to worry about. The one point about having a king was to have someone to organize a war. Perhaps the point is that everyone now has

to wait until the moment for that kind of leadership arrives. Meanwhile the king has to do something to avoid getting bored.

In due course the moment indeed comes. Israel is under pressure, not from Philistia to the west but from Ammon to the east, on the other side of the Jordan. Nahash and the Ammonites have been causing terrible trouble to Gad and Reuben, the Israelite tribes east of the Jordan. They had been systematically disfiguring the Israelite menfolk, blinding them in one eye, to show who was master, and no doubt to encourage them all to abandon the territory to Ammon. It is reminiscent of some late twentieth-century Balkan atrocity. The latest threatened atrocity in Jabesh Gilead is reported west of the Jordan. The news reaches Saul's town, and people weep for their fellow-countrymen, though apparently no-one proposes to do anything about it.

Saul is evidently missing again. He has a gift for dramatic entrances. When he gets home from his day in the fields, he hears the news. The old Saul would also have felt sorry for his relatives across the Jordan but would then have asked what was for dinner. Now instead 'the spirit of God came upon Saul in power' and the new Saul became furiously angry.

No, Yahweh is not very punitive, in the sense of acting like an impartial judge administering justice coldly from on high in the light of what a lawcode says. But Yahweh does go in for being passionately angry from time to time, When people are assaulted and ill-treated and abused is one stimulus to that. And then Yahweh's spirit gets stirred up. Look at the wind with its tumultuous power, its capacity to destroy buildings and uproot trees and stir waters into a maelstrom, and you have a picture of Yahweh's spirit at work - for the word 'spirit' is the word for wind. So it is to be expected that when God influences someone, that person will also be inclined to a passion that they have not felt before, to a fury that they have not expressed before. That is what being given a new heart, being turned into a new person, will be like. So far, Saul has looked the kind of person who has his anger well suppressed, a man who wanders desultorily around the countryside looking for donkeys, and needs a servant to tell him what to do, and hides among the baggage when a crisis comes. Now Yahweh has turned him into a different person, and he gets angry.

He takes the pair of oxen he was ploughing with and cuts them into pieces as if he were going to freeze them in order to roast them joint by joint later. Instead of doing that, he sends them round the country in the manner of the mafia sending you a picture of a coffin to tell you 'this is how you are going to end up if you stay around here'. The recipients of his food parcels are invited not to disappear but to join his army.

They were persuaded, 330,000 of them. It extraordinary what a piece of beef can do. However we interpret the fantastic number, it functions to signal that this is an amazing moment, perhaps the greatest moment in Saul's career (Miscall). It will be all downhill from here. Saul sends word to instruct the people of Jabesh Gilead to set the Ammonites up. The town tells them it is ready to surrender, but before the Ammonites have had chance to take up the offer they have been decimated by Saul's army.

If there was anyone who doubted whether Saul was the right person to be king (and we have noted that there were a few, even apart from me), the doubters are well and truly silenced. The people are all for hanging them high, indeed, but when Yahweh's spirit is not overwhelming Saul, he is too nice a young man to want that. Perhaps here there is a window on an aspect of the character of Saul that will get obscured when the story focuses on his obsession with David. He is a man with a generosity of spirit. In the context of his awareness or fear that he is losing his popularity to David and will lose his throne to him, he reminds his staff of his generosity to them. While the reminding is a somewhat pathetic sign of weakness, one can believe in the reality of the generosity that belonged to happier times.

What people need now is a party, though it is sobered up by the resignation speech we considered in the last chapter. And it might be sobered by the reflection that it is not yet clear how far there is an element of chastisement in Yahweh's appointing a king, interwoven with the manifestation of grace. If there is the former, this will give Saul a position more like Pharaoh's in Exodus than Moses', and that will shape Yahweh's way of relating to Saul and using Saul as the story continues to unfold.

6

The Man Who Made Little Mistakes (1 Samuel 13-14)

So the man who was rather shy and uncertain has been transformed into someone assertive and decisive - or at least, someone capable of being that way.

They say we all have a dominant side to our personalities, and also a 'shadow' side, the capacity to be the opposite of what we have usually been. Sometimes middle age and old age give the chance for that shadow side to emerge. Sometimes circumstances do that: you are put into a different job or life brings a new experience to you and you find you can become a different person. To have to become a different person may be an experience of growth or it may be something of a strain, as you discover when the job or the circumstances change again, but you can adapt to it. Further, it perhaps also points to the possibility that we all have hidden, unrealized aspects to our personality that God can call on, call to the surface, call to God's service. When God does something new with you or gives you a new spiritual gift, it is not so much that God has added on something new that was not there before, in the way you slot a new card into your computer. It is rather that God arouses dormant possibilities, in the way you realize your computer can do many more things than you realized.

God has turned Saul into a different person, given him a new heart, called new sides to Saul to the surface. Assertiveness and decisiveness will often characterize him from now on, until the last sombre day of his life. But this decisiveness will be his burden as much as his asset. 'Decisiveness' can sound as if it is by definition a virtue. It is no such thing. I speak as a decisive person. Decisiveness may simply mean you can make bad decisions more quickly than someone else would. That is the story of much of Saul's life from now on.

One of Saul's problems is that he is surrounded by other strong, decisive, assertive people - his mentor Samuel, his son Jonathan, his protege David (Miscall). Samuel tells him to be decisive but keeps taking back the reins. Jonathan shows a consistent decisiveness that contrasts with Saul's capacity to be keep changing his mind. David's decisiveness ensures that he survives when lesser men would have perished, and ensures that he betters Saul. Ironically, as well as his decisiveness being as morally ambiguous as it is psychologically consistent, it is one that David loses in later scenes in his story when he fails to take the kind of decisive action that is needed in family affairs and in affairs of state.

Saul Makes a Sacrifice (13:1-15a)

For a while Saul sets up a small standing force to try to stop the Philistines encroaching any more on Israelite territory and to start pushing them back down the hills towards the coast. They expel a Philistine garrison in the hills and provoke the main Philistine army to come and put them in their place. It once

again musters for battle on the border between the territories the two peoples control, and at a point much nearer the Israelite heartland. Saul musters his people's army down in the Jordan valley at Gilgal. It was the place where Samuel had gathered the people for a party after the victory at Jabesh Gilead and where they had newly acclaimed Saul as king. It was also the place where Samuel had mysteriously told Saul to wait seven days, when he had promised him his signs. There the people thus wait for Samuel to come and lead their worship again. And they wait. And they wait.

The Israelite forces are under increasing pressure. Ordinary people are beginning to panic, hiding in caves and tombs and water cisterns. Some have fled across the Jordan, which has always been the way to contract out of life West of the Jordan while a crisis sorts itself out. Any moment the Philistines may decide it is time to make a move and may storm down the hillside onto the vulnerable Israelites below. The people's army itself is diminishing as men slip away. Days continue to go by, beyond the time Samuel had said. But they can hardly go into battle without seeking God's help. Something has to be done.

So Saul makes himself do what has to be done. 'Bring the sacrifices here to me'. He offers them to God. No sooner has he done this than Samuel arrives. He is tough as ever. No excuses avail with Samuel. 'You have been stupid. You have not kept Yahweh's command. Yahweh would have established your line as a permanent kingly line in Israel, but now it will not continue. Yahweh's heart is already set on someone else, and has appointed him to be ruler over the people, because you have not done as Yahweh commanded'. And he storms off.

We are only a few verses into Saul's monarchy, and the writing is on the wall for it. This does not seem to mean that Saul's days are numbered in the way that Belshazzar's were when he saw the actual writing on the wall (Daniel 5). Indeed what Samuel means in saying that Saul's regime will not continue is somewhat obscure. This is the only time the verb is translated 'continue' - it usually means 'arise' or 'stand'. When a child does something wrong, we sometimes warn it rather obscurely about what may follow ('If you do that, you won't like what will follow...'). Perhaps Samuel's words work like that. They are a deliberately allusive warning that Saul is intended to take notice of, designed to stop him carrying on in the way this incident portends. Saul is risking his regime, risking the possibility that it will not be established. If he learns the lesson, Yahweh will not have to wheel on stage the alternative leader who is now waiting in the wings but does not know it.

A slightly odd thing about this episode in the story is that it has two beginnings. If it had followed on from Samuel's first meeting with Saul when he referred to waiting at Gilgal, things would have seemed more in order. Instead we had the meeting at Mizpah and the victory over the Ammonites and a different meeting at Gilgal to reaffirm Saul's kingship before we get to the wait at Gilgal. Another odd aspect of the episode is that it then lacks an ending. It seems to run into the sand at this point, after Samuel's rebuke. We were set up for a major battle between Israel and Philistia but the battle never happens. Instead of all Israel facing the Philistine horde, we are back to Saul engaging in guerrilla warfare with six hundred men. What is going on?

One implication of the lack of an ending is that at this point the narrative is not really interested in that great battle that was brewing. Its interest lies in what is going on between Saul and Samuel and God, between Saul and his destiny and the way he faces his challenges and his crises.

There is yet another odd aspect to the episode. When the account of guerrilla warfare is resumed, even its own agenda then seems to be abandoned. Samuel has just threatened the termination of Saul's kingship, five minutes after it was instituted, but now life resumes as if nothing had happened. What is going on?

What we have here are two features that lie behind other biblical narratives. One we have noted already is that the narrative as a whole is utilizing earlier

material and interweaving several stories so as to make a new whole. The good news is that evidently a narrative written centuries after the events it narrates is not written from scratch then.

The other is that biblical narratives sometimes put up front an episode that chronologically belongs later but that tells you where the story as a whole is going and what is its characteristic theme. This scene then frames the way we read what follows. We are familiar with this technique in films. *Titanic* is an example. It starts with the end of someone's life and tells you the rest of the story in the light of it, so that the film eventually finishes where it started. The most familiar scriptural example is Jesus's rejection at Nazareth. In Matthew 13 and Mark 6 that comes at its logical and chronological place, at the end of a sequence of stories about Jesus's ministry in Galilee. In Luke 4 it comes at the very beginning of that ministry, as if to say, 'Now, when you read what follows and read of Jesus healing people and people recognizing Jesus, you need to bear in mind that this rejection is where the story is leading'. Arranging the narrative in non-chronological order is one of the ways the narrator helps the audience to understand what happens. So here, too, the account of events at Gilgal previews for us the dynamics of the narrative that follows. It epitomizes Saul's story as a whole.

It may be that this also explains another oddity. Chapter 13 begins with the strange statement 'Saul was [blank] years old when he began to reign, and he reigned [blank] two years over Israel'. It is odd that the Hebrew text lacks the figures to fill in the blanks. Further, whereas the Greek text of 1 Samuel often helps us to fill in the blanks in 1 Samuel, it does not have this verse at all. Now in the subsequent story of Israel's kings we will become familiar with that kind of introductory statement about a king's reign. My guess is that someone thought there ought to be a statement like that here and tried to add one, but did not have the information to complete the job. In reality, it was not by mistake that the narrator had omitted this information. The narrative of Saul's reign, with this strange beginning, does not work that way. It is not merely the first of a series of accounts of kings' reigns. It is a story with a different dynamic. In not quite being able to provide us with the information it thinks we need, the opening of chapter 13 in the Hebrew text draws attention to that fact. Perhaps that opening verse originally related simply that the events that follow happen after the first two years of Saul's reign.

If the chapter is there to provide us with clues to understanding Saul's reign, how does it do that? First, it portrays Saul caught between Samuel and Yahweh, the victim of pressures that are hard to understand. When Samuel anointed him and told of how he would be turned into another man, he had added those two footnotes, 'Do for yourself what your hand finds' and 'I will show you what to do'. What was the relationship between them? Was Saul being urged to have the courage to be decisive, or not? Did Yahweh relate to Saul and Saul to Yahweh, or did Saul always have Samuel between him and Yahweh? It might seem that Saul and the people both need Saul to relate directly to Yahweh to protect them from the vagaries of a prophet. We will later read stories of prophets who deceive. But it might also seem that the people (and Saul) need Samuel to stand between Saul and Yahweh to protect them from the vagaries of the king. We have been reminded of the temptations of kingship that will assail Saul, and it will be a principle of Israel's existence henceforth that kings are never allowed to stand alone before Yahweh. Over against kings with their institutional power stand prophets with their greater propensity for a free vision of what Yahweh actually wants.

Whatever may be the precise truth there, it gives an extra edge to the question why Samuel said that Saul had to wait seven days. Why did he have to wait like that when the Philistines were mustering on the mountain ridge? Why give them plenty of time to take up a brilliant military position? Is this simply to force Saul to live on the basis of the decisions being taken by Yahweh

and Samuel and not by him? If so, how does he live with the pragmatic demands of responsible kingship and military strategy? Is he being set up? Is this another example of Yahweh's liking to increase the odds so as to make the victory even more amazing than it would otherwise have been? We do not know. Did Saul know? Are the ways of God and Samuel a mystery to him? What is he supposed to do when Samuel fails to arrive? Where lie the limits to that encouragement to do whatever he sees fit to do?

Although Samuel rebukes Saul for not obeying Yahweh's command, discovering how Saul had done that involves not only looking at the fine print in what Samuel said but reading between the lines and looking at what he had not said. Samuel had told him to do what was in his hand, because God was with him, and to go down to Gilgal, and to wait there seven days for Samuel to come to lead in worship. There was no command about what to do if Samuel failed to show up - no command about waiting longer and still not leading in worship. Saul might well have felt that in doing what he saw fit in that circumstance, he was obeying Yahweh's command to do as he saw fit. He had done that, followed his hunches, in rescuing Jabesh Gilead. Might it even be that his failure lies in having lost his courage and decisiveness: he is waiting about for Samuel and looking for spiritual reassurances when he ought to be doing what needs to be done (Miscall)? Or should he simply have waited longer? Or should he have consulted Yahweh about what to do in the developing crisis, as he does in the next chapter?

Saul will find that small acts have huge consequences. In the Bible story it has always been so, and that is comforting because we find it is so in our own experience. You shoot through a traffic light as it changes to red in the way that you and many other people do everyday, but this time you kill someone and you take away a mother or a father or a beloved child in a way that will mark their family for ever, and scar you for ever, too. Eve and Adam take some fruit from a tree, and their relationship with God and with each other and with life (and ours) dissolves before their newly-opened eyes.

Saul finds himself in uncharted territory. Samuel had not said what he was to do if Samuel failed to arrive. It might seem a no-win situation. He could do nothing, ignoring Samuel's first footnote, and risk the lives of his people. Instead he acts, despite his second footnote, and imperils his kingship. The more I read his story, the more it frightens me. I wonder whether its lesson is that earlier on, Saul did not run far enough. Perhaps Yahweh would have pursued him the way Yahweh pursued Jonah, but it might have been worthwhile to try to escape. Perhaps settling for the baggage was a way of recognizing that he would be found. Perhaps it was a way of acknowledging that he both did not want to be king and did want it. And as those thoughts go round my head, at the same time the more glad I am that a story such as this appears in scripture. It anticipates experiences that we have, or that people we know have, as they battle with vocations that seem bigger than them and with experiences that seem constraining and inexplicable and oppressive.

Samuel has told Saul he is stupid (13:13). In a sense you cannot help it if you are stupid, and someone telling you that you are stupid gets you nowhere except to add another level to your sense of inferiority. It may simply make you act stupid in more spectacular ways. Samuel will soon be criticizing Saul for being a little boy in his own eyes (15:17). Calling him stupid is calculated to bring that self-understanding about. I recall the Kevin Kline character in *A Fish Called Wanda*, a man of huge energy and imagination but small intelligence, who responds with sad vehemence each time someone calls him 'stupid'. It is a characteristic and a destiny he knows about but has no capacity to keep being reminded of. There is nothing he can do about it. 'Try as he may to do the right thing, he invariably does the wrong thing' (Exum, *Tragedy*, p. 29).

It is surely no coincidence that one of the last things that Saul ever says, before his night-time visit to try to consult Samuel, is 'I have been stupid' (26:21) (the verb comes only six more times in the Old Testament). The words had stung him and entered his soul, and they are the kind of words that are then self-fulfilling. The very beginning of his story had hinted that Saul does not know his way round life. It was his servant who had that savvy and knew how to find donkeys and how to deal with prophets, as Saul did not. And this is a fundamental disqualification for being a king. One quality a king has to have is wisdom. The story will soon draw to our attention the fact that David possesses this in spades from Day One - though two more of the occurrences of that verb 'be stupid' relate to David. Solomon is then the wise king par excellence, though he also ends up behaving stupidly. Wisdom in a leader comes to be a hope for the future not an expectation in the present (e.g. Isaiah 11:2). The failure of these kings perhaps highlights another aspect of the wisdom in Yahweh's original opposition to having kings at all. But it does also underline the question why Yahweh chose this man to be the first king when he was so spectacularly lacking in the most important quality he needed, and it exposes Saul's tragedy in being drafted into this post. He is 'a man not fitted for a job that should not have been opened' (Good, p. 58).

Saul Makes A Promise (13:15b-14:46)

It looks as if stalemate ensues between Israel and Philistia for a while until Saul's son Jonathan and his armour-bearer exercise an initiative worthy of the Saul who had taken action on behalf of Jabesh Gilead. Is this another sign that Saul himself has lost his nerve, or is it an indication that another aspect of the Peter Principle is at work - now Saul is 'properly' king he is not in a position to indulge in the kind of risky ventures he could be good at?

On their own, Jonathan and his armour-bearer take on the Philistine garrison at Michmash and put them to their heels. The story of this crazy venture (which we will look at further in chapter 9) has an odd footnote - or rather, it leads into a story about Saul that fits with what we are beginning to see about him.

Saul's own camp is a few miles away, but not too far away for his lookouts to be unable to see that something big is going on just down the ridge. They call the roll and discover that Jonathan and his armour-bearer are missing. Saul summons the priest Ahijah, son of Phinehas, one of Eli's notorious sons, to ask Yahweh what they ought to do, but as they are involved in this, the noise from down the road gets louder and louder. Saul concludes that there is no time for that - action is called for. You might have thought that this would lead to a classic defeat, and we would be clear on the moral: don't take action before you know what God's will is. Of course the trouble is that God does not feel obliged to play by the rules even though expecting us to do so (I am told that Calvin said this, but I have not been able to find the reference). God is too serendipity for that. Sometimes it works against you, but this time it works for Saul. He has been unwisely decisive, but he gets away with it. They win a great victory. Perhaps he should actually have been playing his hunches from the beginning, given God's original encouragement to do that, and going for victory instead of stopping for a prayer meeting when action was what was called for. The result was to let another disturbing pattern develop whereby the king several times makes a fool of himself by making decisions that he then has to rescind.

Then comes the lengthy, revealing footnote. As they were about to seek to turn a victory into a triumph, Saul promised Yahweh that the army will fast all day. Now in general one can see that this is a fine idea. Fasting is an accepted biblical way of showing that you are serious with God, that you can be disciplined, that you are focused on something for God's sake. It is a kind of

acted prayer. But this aspect of Saul's decisiveness and his inclination to take action to try to make sure that God is with him means trouble, of several kinds.

One is that unfortunately no one told Jonathan about the promise, and he feasts himself on wild honey in the course of the campaign. Not surprisingly, he is revitalized by doing that, rather than being debilitated by trying to keep fighting on an empty stomach like everyone else.

When Jonathan hears about the fast, he takes the view that his father's promise is insane (once again we hear the ghostly voice of Kevin Kline insisting 'Don't call me stupid'). Fasting and fighting are incompatible. An army marches on its stomach, and they might have killed more Philistines if they hadn't been so hungry (!).

The fast was evidently designed to end at nightfall, like a Ramadan fast, and once evening comes the men take matters in their own hands and hungrily appropriate the Philistines' provisions. The trouble then is that they are eating as if this was just meat, not animals that belonged to God and had God's life in them and were a gift from God. They are taking our attitude, in fact. So again Saul takes remedial action and builds an altar where the animals can be properly killed before Yahweh, in recognition of who they are and what they are and whose they are. One half-expects Samuel to appear out of nowhere to tell Saul that he has no business building altars and setting up what are in effect sacrifices in this way. It would be cause for another chilling sermon. But fortunately for Saul, Samuel is not about, and no one else preaches this sermon, neither the narrator, nor Yahweh.

The problem with Saul's promise and Jonathan's ignorance of it is not only the men's hunger and the possibility that it will mean a smaller victory. Saul had put a curse on anyone who compromises the fast. An Israelite curse is not like a voodoo curse, calling on mysterious powers who will inevitably bring trouble on the person who is cursed. There are no powers apart from the ones Yahweh exercises. A curse is thus a combination of an act of commitment and a prayer and an application of the power that God has given to human beings in creating them and involving them in the achieving of things with God and for God in the world.

Fortunately there is proved to be nothing inevitable about how all this works out. When Saul cannot get guidance from God about how to continue the campaign, he correctly infers that someone has broken the promised fast. Yahweh took the promise seriously. The curse has an effect, but precisely what effect is still to be determined. Whoever has broken the fast must die, says Saul, even if it should be my nearest and dearest. As readers, we of course know that he speaks truer than he knows. That is the way the curse will work itself out, by human action to bring the death of the transgressor. The men draw lots to give God the chance to indicate where the problem lies. Jonathan is identified, and acknowledges that it must be the taste of honey that is what has counted as breaking the fast. He is willing to die, and his father agrees that he must. Otherwise this broken promise will continue to stand between the people and Yahweh, and the victory cannot be turned into a triumph.

What is then significant is that the ordinary Israelite men know that this is all too inflexible, and they know that Yahweh knows this too. Yahweh has signalled that the breaking of the promise cannot simply be ignored, but the question then is, what do you do about it. Saul assumes that a promise is a promise. A decision is a decision is a decision. Changing your mind is indeed a sign of weakness (fortunately God is too secure to have to take that view). The one thing that matters is victory over the Philistines, and everything should be sacrificed to that, even Saul's own son.

It is the stance that leaders have often taken. It requires the insight of the men in the trenches (or the women left behind in the kitchen) to see that this is not so. In the First World War it required the gift of poets in the

trenches, people such as Siegfried Sassoon and W. H. Auden, to articulate that it was not so. One of them used the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac to make the point, but he could have used the story of Saul's near-sacrifice of Jonathan. There comes a point when victory ceases to be worth the price. The people can recognize it, when Saul at first cannot. How they 'ransomed' Jonathan we do not know, but they did that and gave up the chase. It is grievous that there was no such company present to rescue Jephthah's daughter from the consequences of her stupid father's stupid promise when he was incapable of seeing that if God is happy to have a change of mind when new facts emerge, human beings ought to feel free to do so, too (see Judges 11).

While the story thus ends satisfactorily, that is more by default than by design. If Saul wins some sympathy from us when he has to cope with being stood up by Samuel, here he digs his own grave (or rather, Jonathan's). The story also raises some questions about God that we began to ask in connection with that earlier story. Israel's leader is a man who lacks the basic insights that you need if you are to function as a leader, so what was God doing choosing him to be king? Was there no one better qualified? Or was the very choice of Saul part of God's negative response to the idea of having kings, part of God's punishment of Israel? Was Saul playing a role similar to the one the Pharaoh plays in Exodus (see Paul's account in Romans 10)? Was he fulfilling a role that he accepted but whose significance he could not understand, a role that furthered God's purpose even though it brought humiliation and grief to the man himself? And/or does he draw our attention to the fact that national leadership is normally a task that requires far greater gifts and qualities than any likely candidates can be expected to show?

Back in the book of Judges, a man called Abimelech had proposed that the people of Shechem should make him their king. It led his little brother Jotham to make up a story for the people of Shechem, a story about the trees wanting to appoint themselves a king. They asked the olive and the fig and the vine to take on the job, but these pointed out that they had better things to do growing olives and figs and grapes, so the trees agreed to appoint a useless tree, the bramble (9:7-15). Only a bramble has nothing better to do. It is becoming clear that Saul is that bramble. He is just a fighter, really, is Saul. Making him king is like making a footballer king, or like making someone king just because his father was.

National leadership requires greater gifts and qualities than any imaginable candidate is likely to show, yet we regularly react to the fact that the last leader was a fool with the hope that the next one may not be. Our political arrangements and conversations and hopes steadfastly refuse to look reality in the face. Perhaps God was looking it in the face when he declined to treat David as harshly as he treated Saul, even though David's actions look far more reprehensible. What would be the point of deposing him, too? One demonstration of the stupidity of kings will be enough, or if it is not enough, more demonstrations will not open the eyes of people who will not see. Fancy (say) letting a nation's life come to a halt every four years in order to focus for a year on choosing a new leader who will be no better than the last one.

Something equivalent is also true about other forms of leadership? The members of congregations and the employees of organizations and the faculties of seminaries and the ordinary people who belong to movements also usually reckon that their leaders are incompetent, and they are usually right. But then congregations, organizations, seminaries, and movements only have members, employees, and faculty to choose from.

The Man Who Made Up His Own Mind (1 Samuel 15)

In chapters 13-15 three stories characterize Saul as making relatively small decisions that will have huge negative consequences. The first story belonged to the beginning of his reign and anticipated that reign as a whole. It set a limit to it and warned that Saul would not be the beginning of a dynasty. The second story closed with a summary statement about Saul's reign as a whole, which gave us the impression it had fast-forwarded to its last moment and that chapters 13 and 14 do indeed sum up this reign. The third story likely belongs to the latter part of it and declares that his reign is effectively over. It parallels the first, telling of an occasion when the way Saul decides to go about leading worship earns Samuel's catastrophic rebuke.

Saul Dedicates an Offering

Saul has won an impressive victory over Ammon. He has waged an ongoing campaign to contain the Philistines, and met some success, and dealt with other threats to Israel. That includes Amalek, but there is still an issue to settle with them.

It is a campaign with a quite different background. Ammon had been attacking Israelite tribes in its area across the Jordan, and Philistia had been harrying Israel's population centres on the mountain ridge and seeking to gain control over them. Amalek was living peaceably, getting on with its business miles away to the south. But there was bad blood between Amalek and Israel. On the way from Egypt to Sinai, Amalek had attacked Israel and suffered a resounding defeat (Exod 17). Yahweh there determined in due course utterly to blot out the memory of Amalek (strictly speaking, including this story in the Bible is therefore self-defeating). Subsequently Deuteronomy added two nuances to this. It saw Amalek's attack as something of a war crime, the attacking of a faint and weary people and specifically of their stragglers, and it imposed the task of eliminating Amalek's memory on Israel itself (Deut 25:17-19). In Samuel's mind, hundreds of years after the event the moment has come for the fulfilment of this project.

So Saul assembles his citizen's army, marches south, and slaughters the people of Amalek, men, women, and children, and livestock, in the manner of Joshua slaughtering the people of Jericho. The wonder of the event is underlined by the size of the army, of 210,000 men. We are back to the extraordinary scale of chapter 13 rather than the realism of chapter 14.

I would like to avoid trying to comment on this event, partly because I am not too satisfied with anything I can say. But here is what I can say. To a modern Western person this seems a monstrous business, an unpremeditated and pointless massacre, and a war crime of its own. It will seem like that whether the modern person is (for instance) Christian or Jewish or atheist or agnostic. One of the aspects of the episode we might then want to fasten onto is the fact that (like much else in these stories) the event is Samuel's idea. He says it comes from God, but we are not told whether he was right. God is silent through much of these stories. If the event was not God's idea, or at least an appropriate outworking of what God said in Exodus and in Deuteronomy, then we might want to ask why God did not intervene and say so. The answer might be that God is not in the business of intervening every moment into human history, even Israelite history, perhaps because that would make it cease to be human history.

We need then to see that our sense of horror at the story is a culture-relative one. For most Christians over the centuries the story would not have seemed so odd. In the nineteenth century the lives of nations such as Britain and the USA were founded on war as Britain created its empire and America continued to found itself on the killing of native Americans and engaged in a civil war. Even over the past hundred years Christians have probably slaughtered more Christians than in any other century. They are doing so in the Balkans as I write. We will note in chapter 12 indications that as the Old Testament unfolds, it shows among other things that war gets no one anywhere and that there must be other ways of achieving God's purpose in the world. It is thus a shame that Christians like everyone else have in practice preferred the war-affirming part of its story to the war-disillusioned part, even though in theory we dislike the war-affirming part.

In what way might God want these stories from inspired scripture to function with authority for us? The answer might be that they drive us into reflecting on our bad conscience about the wars that we are involved in or that we profit by and into asking in what ways we need to change our thinking or our lives. But treating the Old Testament story as the problem instead of ourselves as the problem gives us the luxury of feeling superior for our distaste at some other people's warmaking (namely, people in the Old Testament) while at the same time being able to carry on with our own warmaking.

This might also enable us to appreciate God's dilemma. Do you get involved in the world and the church as it is and seek to work through that? Can you do that, or do you have to insist on such ethical ideals that you cannot relate to the world as it is? Apparently God has no doubt that the former policy is the one to choose. It would be interesting to try to imagine the way God might have fulfilled the Abrahamic promises without involving Israel in war. I suspect that God would have had to make some different promises. Indeed, it would have been better to have made a different world, as God's reflection in Genesis 6:6 suggests.

At least God insists that warmaking is not random or ethic-free, and Saul accepts that. The point is made by his warning to the Kenites, a sub-group of the Midianites, who lived among the Amalekites. They had taken the opposite stance in relation to Israel at the time of the exodus (see Exod 2-3; 18). It would be wrong to attack them, and Saul warns them to get clear of the area. This is not merely a racist war, an act of ethnic cleansing.

The fact that this war is unnecessary and is designed to be profitless also reflects its ethical context, in a partially paradoxical way. Israel has no need to make war on Amalek. Amalek is not a threat. It is not occupying land that Israel needs or wants. And Israel will gain nothing from the war. The terrible killing of women and children as well as men makes the point. This is not a way of gaining slaves or extra wives. The slaughter of animals and the destruction of everything else also makes the point. Israel will not profit from this war. It is an act of divine punishment. Yahweh is judge, Israel is God's executioner. At the end of this episode Samuel will hack the Amalekite king to pieces before Yahweh with the words, 'as your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women' (15:33). We may not like it, but at least there is a form of ethical rationale for the event. Even if we are tempted to think that ethics is being made the excuse for racism, at least there is recognition that one has to make a claim to the ethical high ground.

The reason why Saul gets into trouble is that after the battle itself, Saul keeps the king alive, along with the best of the livestock and anything else that was valuable. And Yahweh knows, and does not like it. Even if the war were Samuel's idea, Yahweh takes an interest in the outcome. Saul has done a huge amount of killing, but not enough. Yahweh and Moses and Samuel have

determined Amalek's destiny in those passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy and in the instructions to Saul, and Saul has ignored what they determined.

Yahweh Has a Change of Mind

The aftermath of this war keeps bringing us up short like that, in ways that feel negative and ways that feel positive. To begin with, what Yahweh actually says is 'I am sorry I made Saul king'. I made a mistake. I didn't realize how things would turn out. There could hardly be a more telling expression of the reality of God's personal interaction with us than the assumption that God gets caught out by what we do.

Before we proceed, I must qualify that. Our acts will never catch God out in the sense of defeating God, leaving God without any way of responding, leaving God unable to work out what to do. The whole Old Testament story shows that. So does the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As an alternative to destroying the world and creating another world that works in a different way, God was prepared to do the most extreme thing. God was prepared to become a human being and accept crucifixion and then triumph over death, in order to deal with the consequences of having created the actual world. That does not look to me like something built into the intention for the world initiated at creation. It was a consequence of things going wrong and of God getting caught out (Genesis 6:6). It was Plan B (even if God had foreseen what would happen and made this Plan B, so that the lamb can be described as 'slain from the foundation of the world' in one translation of Revelation 13.8). But it was also the ultimate indication that God would not get caught out in the sense of being left with no way of resolving the crisis. I cannot prove that incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection guarantee that God's purpose will be fulfilled, but trust in God means that I stand before the impressive evidence of cradle, cross, and empty tomb and trust that this is so. There is nothing else that could be said or done.

Perhaps there is another sense in which human sinfulness in general, and (for instance) the acts of king Saul in particular, do not catch God out. There is a discipline called Futures Studies that seeks to envisage possible futures in society, in world events, in economics, and so on - desirable events and undesirable ones, so as to be able to work towards the former and against the latter. Like anyone else, God can run computer projections and envisage all the scenarios that might occur in our lives, and therefore work out possible responses to these.

But anticipation is one thing, actuality is another. I could know that my father had a fatal illness, but this does not mean that I do all my grieving before he dies. I could know that I might fail an exam, but this does not stop me being caught out if it happens. Biblical talk about God having regrets indicates that for God, too, it is when things actually happen that God knows them as actual events rather than as merely possible or prospective events. And it is at this moment that God responds to them as such.

You may want to say 'But surely God is outside time?', and I agree that God can transcend time, but the Bible pictures God as involved in time, like us - to put it the other way round, our being involved in time is part of being made in God's image. And you may want to say 'But surely God knows everything - God is omniscient?'. I agree that God can know everything that can be known, but the Bible pictures God's relationship with us by analogy with our relationships with each other. No doubt it is again the other way round, that our human relationships reflect the reality of relationships between God and us. And if we had magic ways of knowing everything about each other without that involving revealing ourselves to each other, this would surely destroy the relationships. So perhaps God could know everything that can be known, but often chooses not to

know it so that the relationships can be real. Or perhaps knowing it as a mere objective fact among all the objective facts in the history of the universe is one thing, but knowing it as part of a relationship with real people is another.

Yahweh's regret at Saul's failure indicates the capacity to be caught out, and the capacity to feel sadness and grief and frustration. It is not actually very surprising to find Yahweh showing these capacities. As I have noted, they feature strongly in the portrayal of God in the opening chapters of the Bible. They feature strongly again in the portrayal of God at Sinai. There Israel at the bottom of the mountain makes up its own mind about how God might be worshipped while at the top of the mountain God is in the very act of expressing a view on the matter to Moses. Here, indeed, the situation is not dissimilar, at least on Saul's account of the matter. He has spared those animals in order to sacrifice them. This is surely something that would please Yahweh. It is more surprising to find Samuel sharing the same complex inner responses as Yahweh, because we have gained the impression that Samuel is such a tough cookie. But when Yahweh talked about being sorry for making Saul king, Samuel 'got angry, and cried out to Yahweh all night' (15:11).

Who or what was Samuel angry with? With Yahweh? With Saul? With the situation? Certainly in what follows he puts Saul in his place in no uncertain terms. The anger again recalls Sinai, though there the anger was initially Yahweh's and only later Moses'. Here it catches Samuel first. That makes more striking the fact that Samuel goes on to cry out to Yahweh all night, like Moses at Sinai confronted by Yahweh's anger, only more so. But who or what was Samuel crying out for? For Saul? For Israel? For Saul to be forgiven? For Yahweh to have mercy on the people he led? Is he praying for them the way he had promised to (12:23)?

Unlike the prayer at Sinai, this one seems to make no difference. Next day Samuel goes to seek Saul out. Saul proves somewhat elusive, which makes for dramatic suspense but may also suggest that he knows there is going to be trouble. It is perhaps significant that Saul has first gone off to 'erect a monument for himself'.

It is Gilgal that is once more the scene of the eventual meeting between Saul and Samuel. Perhaps, indeed, this story is a kind of variant on the previous story of rejection at Gilgal, though the effect of including both is to reinforce the point. Or perhaps meeting at Gilgal, where Saul's kingship was confirmed but also subsequently put into question, draws attention to the fact that Yahweh's regret at Saul's failure to do what he was told does not relate to the Amalekite episode in particular but to the story that has accumulated through chapters 13-15. Saul is not up to the job.

Saul has the first word, praying for Samuel to know Yahweh's blessing and declaring that he has done what Yahweh said. There may be a link between these two. It was Samuel who set him on the way of fulfilling Yahweh's will, and he wants Samuel to be blessed for doing that. 'OK then', says Samuel, 'if you have done what Yahweh said, how come I can hear sheep bleating and cattle lowing?' It would have worked as a metaphor, but there is no reason why it should not be literal reality. The animals were there for sacrifice, as they had been in the previous Gilgal story.

Saul begins to babble on anxiously, attempting to distance himself from what had happened by claiming that it was not him but the people who had decided to keep some of the animals, and anyway it was only a few, they had killed all the rest, and they had just kept a few really nice ones, it was only so that they could offer them to Yahweh, that was surely a good idea, wasn't it, because 'Yahweh your God' (you see we are on the same side, aren't we) would surely like that.... 'Stop,' says Samuel. 'I know it's not first nature for you to be assertive, but you are supposed to be in charge here. Yahweh put you in charge. Yahweh told you exactly what to do. You declined to do it. You swooped on the spoil like vultures on a carcass.'

This might seem unfair, but Saul keeps rather cool in repeating his version of what had happened. He *had* done what Yahweh said. He *had* fulfilled Yahweh's mission. He had simply brought the Amalekite king back (as a trophy? for execution?). And the people had simply kept the best of the animals for a proper sacrifice at Gilgal. Putting people and animals to the 'ban', devoting them to destruction, was itself a form of sacrifice. It meant you were giving them over to Yahweh and not taking them for yourself. We have noted that this at least meant that you were not involved in war for the sake of the financial gain. Keeping some of the animals like that might be seen as involving no contravention of Yahweh's general instruction. They have done what they were bidden.

Samuel is not convinced and waxes poetic, a sign to the audience that we are reaching a key point in the story. Each of his four sentences comprises seven words (one Hebrew word often requires several English ones). Each divides neatly into two parts that pair with each other in some way. In the first and the last the second part completes the first, while in the middle two the second part restates the first part:

Is-there-delight for-Yahweh in-whole-offerings and-sacrifices
like-that-in-listening to-Yahweh's voice?
No. Listening is-better than-sacrifice,
heeding than-the-fat-of lambs.
For rebellion is-a-sin like-divination,
stubbornness is-a-wrong like-idolatry.
Because you-have-rejected Yahweh's word,
he-has-rejected-you as-king.

In each of the first three sentences, the break comes after the fourth word. In the last it comes after the fifth, though one of those five words is a tiny part of speech that cannot be represented in translation and does not really count as a word. The last clause thus closes the speech with a devastating thump.

Once again we are reminded of the Garden of Eden story. All Eve and Adam did was take a piece of fruit. All Saul did was let the people keep some animals to sacrifice to Yahweh. The reaction seems out of all proportion to the action.

Now anyone who comes to the conclusion that one of their employees is not up to the job may have a hard time demonstrating in concrete terms why that is so. Perhaps the basic problem lies in a telling observation by Samuel: 'though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?' (15:17). Saul has been alternating between listening to the people and blaming them. He is behaving as if he is still a mere Benjaminite (9:21). He is supposed to be in charge here.

The Man Who Was Not After God's Heart

Implicitly, perhaps, Saul sees that. Although he has earlier tried to blame the people, like Adam blaming Eve and Eve blaming some other odd character, Saul suddenly accepts responsibility for what happened. OK, I made a mistake. 'I have sinned. I have contravened the word of Yahweh and your words, because I was afraid of the people and I listened to their voice.' But surely that is not the end of the world? 'Now please forgive my sin. Come back with me and I will bow down to Yahweh'. But no, there is no way back. Perhaps the problem is precisely that Saul is inclined to want to take refuge in the world of worship when God is after something else. Samuel repeats the words of rejection and turns away. Saul grabs his coat as he turns, and it tears. Quick as a flash Samuel transforms this into a sign. 'That is how Yahweh has torn the kingship from you today and given it to someone else, a better man than you. And the

Glory of Israel does not disappoint by feeling sorry, because he is not a human being, to feel sorry' (15:29).

If I were Saul, I would have wanted to say 'BUT YOU JUST SAID HE WAS SORRY - sorry he had made me king'. Indeed, in case we have missed the point, the narrator will say it again in a moment, to close off this episode in the story (15:35). The older translations help the reader to see what is going on, but the more recent ones obscure it by speaking of Yahweh having a change of mind in 15:29 instead of feeling sorry. But the verb translated 'change one's mind' or 'be sorry' is actually the same. If I were Saul I would be tempted to say 'You mean Yahweh can be sorry about positive commitments and not fulfil them because I have done something wrong, but Yahweh cannot be sorry about declarations of punishment even if they look over the top. Is that what you mean by Yahweh not feeling sorry the way a human being feels sorry - Yahweh is tougher than a human being?' Saul's experience illustrates the inexorable workings of law: Saul has disobeyed, disobedience must be punished, and compassion is impossible (Exum, *Tragedy*, p. 34).

In the Old Testament as a whole it is not so. By definition Yahweh is someone who keeps commitments for 25,000 years or so and forgives wrong and rebellion and sin. That is the theological definition that the people's rebellion at Sinai provokes (Exodus 34:7), and it is a statement that gets repeated on a number of occasions in the Old Testament. The prophets themselves are special witnesses to it, for their task is to warn of calamity that Yahweh intends to bring because of wrong and rebellion and sin. They do that so as to shake people into being sorry themselves and turning back to Yahweh, so that the calamity can be cancelled. Because Yahweh's desire is always to forgive.

Perhaps Yahweh is tougher on leaders than on ordinary people. Moses, after all, loses his chance to set foot in the promised land because of what seems a trivial offence (Num 20:1-13). A number of Old Testament stories presuppose the danger of getting too close to the white-hot God whose light and heat may frizzle you. Ordinary people knew what they were doing when they hid behind Moses (Exod 20:18-19), as the New Testament later affirms (Heb 12:25-29), though it tells that story of one ordinary couple who paid a terrible price for a small-ish looking piece of deception (Acts 5:1-10). Being required to stand close to God and to find that the stakes are then very high has caught Saul. Terrible consequences can follow from one mistake. As we have noted before, with hindsight the only thing he could have done is hide further away than the baggage when he knew Yahweh was calling him. Anyone who actually wants to be a leader looks a complete fool.

Saul accepts his destiny. He acknowledges he has sinned. He simply wants Samuel to do him the honour of coming back with him in the presence of the elders and before Israel as a whole. These are the elders who did not want to exercise responsibility and who set going the process whereby he came to be king, and the people whose insistence on keeping alive some of the animals to honour Yahweh has set going the process whereby he is losing his throne. Again he says he wants to submit to Yahweh. The translations have 'worship', which is fair enough, but the word is a body-word: it denotes physical prostration.

They worship, and the hapless Agag meets his fate, and prophet and king part never to see each other again, though Samuel grieves over Saul with that grief reflected in his night-long crying to Yahweh, and (I trust) continues to pray for him as he said he would. This does not make the continuing story of Saul's reign less terrifying - rather the opposite. But perhaps this is a further consequence of the story's not being told in chronological order. We know from chapters 13-15 where Saul's reign is going.

Often the nature of a story is to be told from the end. Admittedly novelists do not always know where their story is going until they have completed it, but at least it is very clear that this narrative knows where it is going. It is

written with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. Saul is destined to lose his crown.

In the midst of events as they unfold, it may be difficult to see this, and it may be difficult to see why it should be so. In more than one way, Saul reminds me of Cain. In reading the Cain and Abel story, Christians are often keen to establish the reasons for Cain's offering being accepted and Abel's being rejected, and there are hints of the reasons in the story. But they are only hints. The focus of God's words to Cain after the event is not on the reasons for the rejection but on what Cain is going to do with the rejection. It is now that sin lies couching at the door. The focus of the Saul story, too, lies on what Saul does with rejection. And in Saul's story, too, the reasons for the rejection and the evidence of its rightness come out in the events that follow as much as in the events that precede it. We can waste a lot of energy on 'Why did this happen to me?' and fail to have the energy for the question that really needs handling, 'What am I going to do with it?'

David Jobling comments that 'It is not possible to make a sensible comparison between the monarchies of Saul and David, for different rules apply to them from the outset' (p. 84). He compares the differences between God's rules for the world in Genesis 1 and in Genesis 9, and the comparison is instructive. Saul's failure recalls that of Cain's parents. It was a trivial act with epoch-making or epoch-destroying consequences. As Adam and Eve's sin falls far short of Cain's wickedness, so Saul's sins fall far short of the wickedness of David, but he gets away with nothing. That is the snag about being the first human being or the first king. After seeing how you turn out, God has chance to rethink things, to have a change of mind about the arrangement. Next time God has to set up a structure that takes more seriously the fact of human sin.

That is part of what makes the new arrangement a covenant. There was no covenant in Genesis 1-3. You do not need a covenant in the Garden of Eden. And there was no covenant with Israel's first king. But when that first king has had chance to demonstrate that kings are just as recalcitrant as ordinary human beings, a new arrangement can be set up that takes account of the fact. It is almost as if the triviality of Saul's sin is expressly designed to show how little is required to lead to rejection, while the hideousness of David's sin is expressly designed to demonstrate how impossible it is to terminate Yahweh's commitment to David's house (Jobling, p. 84).

And in each case the reason lies not in the character of the individual but in their place in a greater story. In the Introduction I mentioned the fact that the Bible is more interested in plot than in character, that individuals in this story are subordinate to the direction the whole story is going. Another way to put it is to say that the story of people such as Saul and David is subordinate to the story of the people. Saul's sins were real but trivial. The more substantial sin that made his mistakes unforgivable was the sin of his people asking for a king and rejecting Yahweh as king. Is it necessary that he makes the mistakes that will lead to his rejection and clear the way to a new future, in David (Exum, *Tragedy*, pp. 38-39)? 'Saul is kingship's scapegoat' (Gunn, *Saul*, p. 125). 'Saul is caught between his own turbulent personality and the antagonism of God toward human kingship' (Exum, *Tragedy*, p. 41).

Back in the first rejection story (13:14) Samuel offers us a hermeneutical clue to the interpretation of these events, though the translations have turned it into a misleading one. They have Yahweh seeking a man 'after his own heart'. That would be puzzling. It is hard to see David as more a man after God's own heart than Saul was. But the expression is more literally 'a man according to God's heart' and it does not suggest anything about David's character. It simply indicates that God set his mind or heart on David. The phrase comes with similar meaning elsewhere (see 14:7; 2 Samuel 7:21; Jeremiah 3:15; Psalm 20:4). It never means what the popular understanding finds in the phrase's application to David.

To say that David is a man according to God's heart is another way of saying that God chose him. And if there is one thing we learn from the Old Testament, it is that God does not choose people because they stand out as characters. Think only of Abraham the wimp or of Jacob the twister, or read what God explicitly has to say about the basis for choosing Israel (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). To say that God will replace Saul by a man according to his heart, a man of his choice, implies nothing about David being a better man than Saul.

BUT IT'S NOT FAIR THEN, we shout. No it is not, and this is just as well. If fairness were the basis of God's operating in the world, we would all be in a mess. It is just as well that God makes unfair commitments to people such as Abraham and Jacob and David and you and me. If God made our deserve the basis of operating with the world, God would never make a commitment to anyone. What God does is make a commitment to some people who do not deserve it in order to reach out and bring blessing to the rest of the world that does not deserve it. That is God's gamble. That is the doctrine of election. It does also involve being unfair to other people, such as Pharaoh, the Canaanites, Saul, and your next door neighbour whose eyes God has not opened to see the glory of God in the face of Christ in the way that God has opened yours. They are not markedly worse characters than the Israelites or David or you. It puts a big pressure on Israel, David, and you to see that the purpose of your election is realized in manifesting God's compassion to the world.

8

The Replacement Brown-eyed Handsome Man (1 Samuel 16-18)

So where do we go from here? If Israel wants a king, and Yahweh agrees to go along with this, and appoints someone tall and handsome, and he turns out to lack the personal qualities for the task, what does Yahweh do? Try the same thing again and see if it works better the second time. You have to grant God this, you can never second-guess what God will do.

At a Festive Meal in Bethlehem

I keep changing my mind over who is the tough character in this narrative, Yahweh or Samuel. To put it another way, you can never quite get the measure of either. When Samuel grieves over Yahweh's rejection of Saul, Yahweh's response is to tell him to quit this sentimentality and set about anointing the next king, down south in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is towards the obscure reaches of Saul's kingdom and well outside Samuel's usual area of operation (7:16-17), though it is on the way to Beersheba where his sons plied their trade (8:2). Samuel is nervous about the act of treason that Yahweh commissions. The Bethlehem city elders share his nervousness, assuming that the arrival of society's toughest judge-prophet must be bad news. Corruption at city hall is about to be exposed. Those bracelets they brought back from Amalek are about to be their downfall. That woman Ruth turns out to have a perfectly good husband already, maybe five (John 4) or seven (Matthew 22).

No, it is to be a repeat of events we have read of before. It is to be a festival occasion like the one when Samuel anointed Saul, but also a small-scale version of the gathering at Mizpah where Saul was publicly designated, when the handsome but otherwise under-qualified young son of a well-known local family was to be marked out as leader. Even the background of rejection is parallel, though this time it is not the people's rejection of Yahweh as king but Yahweh's rejection of Saul as king.

Jesse presents his sons to Samuel: Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah, seven of them altogether. But Samuel gets no word of knowledge regarding any of them like the one he had had which brought him here to Bethlehem. They have seniority in their favour, they are strapping, strong young men, but that is not the criterion for being chosen as king.

Jesse's eighth son is under-age and is not allowed at even an occasion like a festive sacrifice, where the wine flows. Anyway, someone has to continue undertaking the menial task of keeping an eye on the sheep and being ready to raise the alarm if wild animals threaten them. 'Fetch him' says Samuel. Yes, he is the one.

Yahweh had told Samuel that the inner person matters more than appearance or height, but what marks out David is his complexion and his eyes and his good looks (16:12). Perhaps the assumption is that the inner person and the outer person should be expected to match. Israelite thinking was inclined to reckon that if God created both the visible body and the inner personality, there ought to be some congruence. But to us there is still a difference between Yahweh's initial insistence on looking at the inner person (16:7) and the narrator's subsequent comments on the appearance of David as the one Yahweh chose, with no reference to what kind of person he was (16:12). This difference sets up a disjunction that gives a clue to the way David's story will unfold. It also makes us think again about the significance of the heart, but we will see that the story of David and Goliath may clarify the point.

So Samuel anointed David in the presence of his brothers (what on earth did they make of that?) and Yahweh's spirit rushed on him from that day onward, the same way it had on Samson and Saul.

What difference did it make? Does David tear a lion apart or sing in tongues? David does do things like that, but no connection is made with being overwhelmed by Yahweh's spirit when he does. There is another irony to be put alongside the one about the relationship of outer appearance and inner person. If Yahweh's spirit is at work on David, we see no signs. His is a quite different kind of story, a post-charismatic kind of story. David is a charismatic leader, but he is that in another sense, a more human-looking sense, despite Yahweh's concern about the inner person.

At the Court of King Saul

Suddenly we are in Saul's court, but there is a clear link with what preceded. Yahweh's spirit has rushed on David (16:13) and it has left Saul (16:14). Of course the Old Testament knew that there was more than enough of Yahweh's spirit to go round, enough to be adequate (for instance) for both Saul and David. Saul had originally 'caught' the spirit without that worship group losing it. But it also knew that there was a special activity of Yahweh's spirit in connection with being king, for instance, and this awareness lies behind the present comment. It will be logical for one person at a time to be gripped by Yahweh's spirit for the task of kingly leadership, and Saul's moment has passed.

There is a fact that may seem more solemn. A bad spirit from Yahweh has overwhelmed Saul instead (16:14). The translations have 'evil spirit' but this may give the wrong impression. Hebrew has words for 'bad' and 'wicked' as English does, and the story uses the first of these words here. 'Bad' can mean 'wicked', but it is a more open word. Further, the Old Testament has no hesitation in assuming that bad (unpleasant, calamitous) things can come from Yahweh (compare Isaiah 45:7), but it would have more hesitation in saying this about wicked things (though it might still have less hesitation than us).

Yet further, the Old Testament elsewhere does not talk about people being overwhelmed by demonic spirits in the way that the Gospels do. It does talk about a jealous or a deceptive or an unfaithful or a perverse spirit. We

ourselves know how a person may seem to become possessed by an attitude that seems 'over the top'. It may be an expression of who they are but it seems bigger than they are. That can happen in positive ways. A person can seem to be overcome by a spirit of generosity or forgiveness. We do not then personalize that in the sense of reckoning that an external personal spiritual force possesses this individual. There is something supernatural about it all right, but it is more a matter of God bringing out capacities within the person that might not otherwise receive full expression.

The Old Testament's usual way of talking is then similar to ours. Saul comes to be possessed by a bad spirit. What he comes to be is the 'natural' outworking of the kind of person he is, confronted by the situation he confronts. It comes to dominate him because Yahweh brings that about.

As well as helping us avoid reading into the story the connotations of 'evil spirit' in Christian parlance, the phrase 'bad spirit' has the advantage of being a familiar English phrase that may give us just the right impression - we can also compare the English expression 'bad temper'. People sometimes think of Saul's 'evil spirit' as like depression. The verb 'tormented' in NRSV and NIV adds to that impression, but they subsequently translate this verb 'overwhelm' or 'assail' (2 Samuel 22:5). And we will see later that the specific outworking of Saul's bad spirit is violence - he tries to kill people. If we are to psychologize, he sounds to me rather like a borderline personality.

In the old days, a chapter or two ago, killing people had been a positive outworking of Saul's being overwhelmed by Yahweh's spirit. The difference was that in those days he was 'inspired' to take action for what was right. Now he is 'inspired' to take such action indiscriminately, like the king in Alice in Wonderland who was fond of uttering 'Off with his head'. The change that Yahweh has brought about in his personality, the way Yahweh has allowed other aspects of the potential inside him to receive expression, was not just a temporary one. Saul had become a dangerous person to be around, for people who thought they were his friends and servants as well as for those who deserved to be his enemies. He continued to be decisive and aggressive rather than reticent and uncertain, but now you could never predict which way he would jump. It says quite something that his servants could apparently have the kind of adult-adult conversation they did have with him when he was calm, in which they could talk straight (but sympathetically) about his 'problem'.

It would cause no surprise if Saul had been thrown into depression by the way he has been treated - being hauled from obscurity to power, and then cast off, like a pop star. We might be tempted to interpret his story like that and prescribe Prozac (especially as the makers of Prozac give considerable money for the development of theological education). The Old Testament equivalent is to prescribe music. With some irony, the music that once stirred him up now calmed him down. When I was looking for the source of that phrase 'off with his head' I came across a statement by the great hymn-writer F. W. Faber, 'The music of the gospel leads us home'. I suspect that Faber is speaking metaphorically. He means that the gospel is like music in its capacity to minister to us. But he is then presupposing what Saul's servants knew, that music has that extraordinary capacity to arouse and inspire and involve - and to soothe and reassure and mellow.

Enter David, who turns out to be Renaissance Man. No wonder he captivated Michelangelo. Not only can he play Spanish Guitar in such a way as to melt the fiercest hearts (so one of Saul's staff tells us). He is also a brave warrior. He is good with words. He is good-looking. And Yahweh is with him. At the moment he is also said to be caring for some sheep, as he was in the previous episode. This might suggest that Israel has a thing or two to learn about career guidance or human resource management, though I suspect that what is happening here is that the description put on the lips of Saul's servant is an anticipatory one. It is the narrator's summary of what David will turn out to

be. At the moment, he is simply an engaging shepherd boy (or a smelly shepherd boy, always walking in sheep shit) who whiles away the hours out there in the field singing to himself but is indeed capable of courage in defending the sheep from attackers when necessary.

Like Hannah sending Samuel to live with Eli, Jesse sends off his youngest son to Ramah to live at Saul's court, with bread, wine, and a kid goat. And Saul sees that David has a good bath and falls for David's charisma, as everyone does. He makes David his armour-bearer, presumably something of a sinecure in the good times. We are not told if David had a roadie to carry his guitar, such as he would need if he were being Saul's roadie. From now on, whenever Saul was overwhelmed with that bad spirit from Yahweh, David would play soothing new-age-style music and the king would calm down.

The trouble is that, like medication, music soothes on the surface without dealing with the volcano beneath, which is thus left to erupt again, and again, and again.... What Saul needs is not just a prophet like Samuel or a musician like David but a priest of the kind that Eli eventually managed to be when he encouraged rather than discouraged Hannah to express the grief that lay inside her. But there is no one like that on the palace staff at Gibeah. Indeed, the staffs of palaces and other institutional headquarters have rarely employed such people, except as chaplains to bless the work, even though they might play a more effective role in encouraging well-being and therefore the effectiveness of the institution. I expect you would have got short shrift from Saul if you had suggested he needed one.

At a Battle in the Vale of Elah

Like the story of Saul's becoming king, the David story is episodic. Jumping from one vignette to another as the middle of chapter 16 does could simply be the way of telling the story. Many films work like that. What is sometimes different about these stories is that the director seems to have ignored the continuity person. One episode is apparently unaware of the previous one. It again suggests that originally separate stories have been strung together. But they all contribute to the filling out of a portrait.

Once more the scene changes, and suddenly Israel and Philistia are fighting again. The two armies are confronting one another, this time in the badlands between Judean and Philistine territory southwest of Jerusalem (but the later capital is still just a little Jebusite town, not under Israel's control yet). The mountains climb steeply from the west hereabouts, but the Vale of Elah gives the armies space for their war game. The Philistines suggest a very civilized way of sorting matters out on this occasion. Let there be a one-on-one contest between the best fighter among the Philistines and the best fighter among the Israelites. The winner's side become the winners in the battle as a whole.

Of course there is a catch. The Philistines have a seven-foot basketball champion called Goliath. In the Israelite army, everyone who is more than five feet five is walking round in his socks hoping no-one notices him in case he gets drafted.

The unevenness between the episodes in the story appears in the fact that David is not only still looking after sheep but is also (we will see) unknown to Saul. While his big brothers are old enough for the draft, he has only the little brother's task of ferrying provisions to them from their home in Bethlehem, fifteen miles away, and carrying news back to their father. On one such occasion David leaves the supplies at the camp and goes ahead to the front line to find out what is going on. There he hears Goliath uttering his daily challenge.

'What is this guy doing, defying the armies of the living God?', asks David of the men next to him as they listen in fear to the Philistine champion. They

are the first words we have heard from David, and they are fine opening words. Yet there is about them the ambiguity that will run through David's whole public life. If he had said 'defying the living God' his questions would have been much less equivocal. Bringing in the army brings in national pride and human machismo. Fighting wars is one of the ways that men prove that they are men. Being taunted about whether you can even start a battle, let alone win one, is to have your manhood taken away. In modern societies, not having the opportunity to fight a war means you have to make a lot more of baseball or football than they might seem worth on the surface. On the other hand, this does not explain why the USA manages to make baseball a family affair and why Britain is so good at producing soccer hooligans.

The point is continued in David's succeeding words. 'And what will be the reward of the man who kills this Philistine and takes away Israel's reproach?' A traditional culture like Israel's is a 'shame culture' at least as much as a 'guilt culture'. Of course in modern cultures we also know that what other people think of us matters hugely to whether we feel we are OK. But where people have a strong sense of community, what others think of us matters much more. To know that other people look down on you is a serious threat to whether you exist in any meaningful sense. What Goliath was doing each day to each individual Israelite was what Goliath and Philistia as a whole were doing to 'little' Israel as a people.

So what will be the reward for the man who stops Goliath taunting Israel and restores the pride of Israel's manhood? The reward will be money, freedom, and the king's daughter as his wife (17:25). The story is indeed beginning to reveal what manhood and womanhood are about. Manhood is about fighting. Womanhood is about being real estate, being the property of your father until he finds good reason to realize his assets, spend his currency. David had already learned the lessons about manhood, being the beneficiary of having seven older brothers. He is now being taught a lesson about womanhood that he will stick by for the rest of his life. It is a great irony that his words also involve David in dismissing Goliath as a mere 'uncircumcised' Philistine (we noted in chapter 2 that male circumcision was common among Semitic peoples but that the Philistines were originally Europeans). David is circumcised on the outside all right, but the Bathsheba affair will show that one of his problems is that his own manhood is uncircumcised on the inside.

On the one hand, all this gives extra force to our wondering about Yahweh's choice of David being based on what Yahweh sees in David's heart. At the same time, his attitude to Goliath and the way he is prepared to put his life on the line in confronting him may resolve our wondering. What Israel needs at this moment is a man with some machismo, and David certainly has that. Perhaps it was indeed guts that Yahweh was able to see in looking into his heart on that festive occasion in Bethlehem. It would have been hard for Samuel to realize that he had more impressive potential than his older brothers, but Yahweh could see it.

Suddenly David's big brother hears David's voice. 'What are you doing here', he asks, not in brotherly affection but in disdain. 'You're supposed to be looking after the sheep. If they get attacked, it will be your fault. You are dreaming up trouble. You've just come here to see the battle'. 'What have I done now? It was only a question.' One can hear a lifetime's family's squabbles behind the question and the response.

So David wanders about the camp chuntering about the impossibility of allowing Goliath to keep getting away with this. Word reaches Saul, who sends for him. 'I will go and fight him'. 'You're only a teenager. He is a seasoned warrior. He knows what he is doing'. 'I know what I am doing. Looking after sheep means taking on lions and bears. I can take on a mere Philistine.' The climax comes with the unequivocal words, 'Yahweh saved me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear. He will save me from the hand of this Goliath.'

Is it faith, or religious words to buttress bravado and impress the audience? David is, after all, a person who knows how to say the right words at the right moment. He is 'prudent in speech' (16:18 NRSV): the word is sometimes translated 'skilful' or 'cunning'. To be able to say what is true and is at the same time what the audience wants to hear (whether or not it is the most important thing in your own mind) is a most important asset for a politician.

'You had better have some armour, then', says Saul. Children's stories then picture Saul's armour as too big for David, but that is not his reason for refusing it. He is simply not used to wearing it. It provides protection, but it hinders movement. He approaches Goliath with his shepherd's equipment, a sling and five smooth stones that will fly well. He knows what he is going to do. It will not involve going near enough to Goliath to need armour. Goliath is pardonably dismissive of this good-looking, strapping young man with no weaponry. 'You come to me with sword and spear and javelin', says David, 'but I come to you in the name of Yahweh Armies [the God who commands the forces of earth and heaven], the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have scorned. This very day Yahweh will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down and cut off your head, and give the dead bodies of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, so that the whole world may know that there is a God in Israel, and all this assembly may know that Yahweh does not save with sword or spear. The battle is Yahweh's, and he has given you into our hand'.

And David shot one of his stones at Goliath and hit him on the only point that was vulnerable, the gap in his helmet that he needed in order to be able to see. Goliath fell stunned to the ground. David ran to him, killed him with his own sword, then cut off his head. The Philistines ran for their lives, and sometimes kept them, while the Israelites plundered their camp. David put Goliath's armour in his tent and kept his head for subsequent display in Jerusalem.

Winning the Hand of the King's Daughter(s)

The closing words to the story indicate that Saul does not know David, notwithstanding what we read in the previous chapter. This would fit with the fact that the killing of Goliath is attributed to someone else from Bethlehem in 21:19. 1 Chronicles 20:5 solves the problem by telling us that this was Goliath's brother, which must mean that the mother of the pair of them had quite a task on her hands bringing up two boys growing up to that size. Just think of the cost of shoes. As is the case with Robin Hood and Dick Turpin, stories can aggregate around one composite person rather than staying spread around several people. The Goliath story can still 'introduce' David, give us a true impression of who David was. If he did not actually kill Goliath, he could have done. He was not just a pretty face.

But he was indeed both a pretty face and a powerful warrior. Soon the women are greeting the returning army. They know their place. The men go out and do things (play ball, rescue people from the surf, kill giants) while the women stay home and get ready to take the pizza out of the freezer and assemble the marching band for when the men return and practise their victory chants. 'Saul has killed his thousands'.

Now we have noted already how Hebrew songs work, a bit like the blues. In the blues you sing one line, then you sing it again while you make up a third line, then you sing that third line which you have just made up. In Hebrew songs, you sing one line, then you sing another line which is similar to the first in some way, but which in some other way goes beyond it. In the light of the news that has got back to them, the women drool over David and anticipate the way the future will develop. 'Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands.'

Someone in Saul's position does not have to be especially neurotic to find this a bit threatening. To put it more strongly, you have to be an especially secure kind of leader to be able to handle that kind of adulation of a member of your staff. We have seen reason to suspect that Saul is not that strong inside, or to suspect that there were two people inside him. There was the man who was backward about coming forward and unsure of himself, who needed a servant to tell him what to do. There was also the man within whom God could arouse the strength and energy to take on Israel's oppressors but who did not have a lifetime's experience of learning when to act decisively and when to lean into the wind.

Paradoxically, a man who is sure of himself has much more chance of letting other people be more successful than he is, and/or of letting them be spoken of as more successful than he is. Once they start talking in those terms about David, Saul comments, 'What can he have but the kingdom?' The bad temper returns, and David becomes the victim of it as well as the cause of it, rather than the solution of it. Twice Saul lashes out at him but David sidesteps. One wonders whether Saul was really trying. One might nevertheless imagine the experience leaving David rather scared, though actually the story then immediately adds that Saul was afraid of David (18:12).

Saul's feelings about David have become very complicated, and they will stay so through to their last meeting. Sometimes it is so with couples whose marriage collapses. The film *The War of the Roses* portrays the horrendous collapse of a marriage. It closes with the couple throwing things that are half-designed to kill each other, and then almost killing each other in a fall. As they lie prostrate, one reaches out a hand but the other pushes it away. In Saul's case the act of aggression is the act of the man of fear, the man who cannot handle someone else being more successful than he is or receiving more adulation than he does, the man from whom God has withdrawn commitment. The man who knows who he is and to whom God is committed does not need to fear.

The irony of course is that Saul is absolutely right in what he says about David. Yahweh has indeed designated David for the kingship. When Saul promises his daughter to David, David responds 'But who am I and who are my family that I should be the king's son-in-law?' We do not know how far David's tongue is in his cheek, but the narrator's tongue surely is, because it is the person who has been designated as Saul's successor who is talking.

A man of huge maturity might have reflected, 'Ah, I know that Yahweh does not want me to carry on as king. Perhaps David is to be my successor. I must train him up for the task.' Alas, Saul is not even a man of ordinary maturity. He does not wish to see David any more. He promotes him in the army, perhaps already with the hope that soon finds expression that this will be his downfall. It is the stratagem David will later adopt when he needs to get rid of Uriah the Hittite, though typically David then succeeds where Saul fails. Indeed, Saul's sitting at home while the army is out fighting is a strange anticipation of the inaction that gets David into trouble with Bathsheba. For a dozen chapters now David will need to lead a charmed life, and he will do so, because 'Yahweh is with him.' Worse than that for Saul, he will have a string of military successes that will build up the nation's position. Saul has forgotten the importance of that for the nation. As far as he is concerned, these successes simply mean that the people are all the more inclined to sing about Saul's thousands and David's ten thousands.

When Saul acted too mercifully to Agag and claimed to be wanting to honour God with the animals he spared from being slaughtered on the spot, there is no reason to think that he was just being devious. After Samuel rebuked him, there is no reason to think that Saul's repentance was merely show. When he prayed for Yahweh to be with David in his battle with Goliath, he no doubt meant it for David's sake, for Israel's, and for his own. Now Yahweh's name is on his lips for a different reason. He promises his daughter Merab to David. There is no

word of what she thought of this arrangement, and the fact that we are usually told that everyone was smitten by David raises the question whether she was the one exception. But her feelings would be irrelevant. We have noted that women are property to be passed on from one man to another. 'In return for that, be valiant for me and fight Yahweh's battles', Saul says. But what he is thinking is, 'My best hope is that the Philistines are the end of him' (18:17). The name of Yahweh is on his lips, but death is in his heart.

In the event, Saul apparently realizes the un-wisdom of bolstering David's position by giving him the king's daughter, and makes sure of the point by giving her to someone more harmless. When he changes his mind again with the inconsistency that will become his defining feature, this leaves David available for Merab's younger sister, who lets out a sigh of relief and a whoop because she is indeed smitten by David (18:19-20). It is the only occasion in scripture when a woman is said to love a man. It is therefore a grim fact that this love will in due course turn to hate. Saul's utilization of the fact of Michal's love shows how in human relationships, too, his word and his heart came adrift. The people's love for David is one reason Saul gives for promising his daughter to him, along with his own appreciation of him. Michal's feelings were also irrelevant to this transaction, of course.

Once his appreciation of David would have been the real reason for giving him his daughter. Saul had been attracted to David, the way that everyone was. But now in his heart there is something different going on. Inviting into his family the man whom his daughter loves is part of another plot to see him killed. Women are not merely property passed from father to husband but devices in working out male fear and hostility. The marriage price is the death of a hundred Philistines. 'No problem', says David, killing two hundred for good measure (18:27; see NRSV margin). The grisly evidence of their death is their foreskins, which David evidently has to cut off after killing them. The unsavouriness of this procedure may put us off from noting the irony of the scene. I am not sure whether Saul is speaking metaphorically when he speaks of a dowry comprising a hundred Philistine foreskins. Perhaps he simply means he wants to see the death of a hundred of these notoriously uncircumcised foreigners. But David certainly interprets the requirement literally. It is practically Freudian. We have noted that the man who cooperates in paying this price to his potential father-in-law is a man deeply uncircumcised.

We would like to say that David's many-sided success comes from being someone who trusts in God and seeks to do God's will in a way that Saul does not. We would like to say that because we would like to believe that God acts on the basis of a system like this. Then we know where we are. And there is something in that. But God's choice of people does not seem to be based on that kind of criterion, as a quick read of the Old Testament or the New Testament shows, and God's persisting with people does not seem to be based on that kind of criterion either. We noted at the end of chapter 7 that there is thus a sense in which God's preference for David over Saul is arbitrary. The point is that David is the one God now intends to use, and therefore David is systematically protected.

As the story will show, this does not mean that David is turned into a holy person or a mature person or a happy person. Indeed, there does not seem a happy person in this narrative (Saul, Jonathan, Michal, David...). The whole of 1 and 2 Samuel is an unhappy story. People such as Saul and David get a hand dealt to them. What the hand is relates to what God intends to achieve in the story of Israel. It also incidentally relates to what happens to them as people, to whether they end up holy or mature or happy. We fantasize that the person who is successful and famous like David is better off than the person who tries and fails like Saul, but it is not necessarily so. Everything depends on what they do with the experience. We will see that there may be grounds for reckoning that Saul dies a better death than David, and that may mean that in

the end he had worked better with the hand he had been dealt, though it took him a long time to do so.

In the meantime Saul is afraid, afraid of David (18:29). Modern leaders often have good reason to be afraid of their subordinates, especially when things start going wrong. They may be ill-advised to leave the country for a state visit elsewhere. They may find they have been replaced by the time they return. They always need to have their eyes on their backs if they do not want to end up dead. David will turn out to be someone who brings death to many people, and Saul might have feared him for that reason. But David is not interested in killing Saul, and the story probably does not imply that this possibility is the reason for Saul's fear. Saul is afraid of David not because David may kill him but because his God has left him and is with David (18:12) and because his daughter loves him (18:28). He does not yet know that his son is also committed to him.

His fear is not at all irrational, any more than the fear that will threaten to paralyze him near the end (28:5, 20). It would have been irrational not to be afraid if you were Saul in these circumstances, as a soldier's lack of fear of battle is a sign of psychosis. But a consequence of this reasonable fear is that Saul makes fear a characteristic feature of his regime. When a person in power is afraid, they have the power to make other people afraid, not least the people they are themselves afraid of. Fear comes to Abiathar (22:23), to David's gang (23:3), and to David, too (23:17). But it most dominates Saul himself.

9

The Man Who Loved (Too?) Much (1 Samuel 14; 18; 19-20; 23; 31; 2 Samuel 1; 9)

When I started this book, I thought that if there was a man in these stories who always behaved well, it was Samuel. Since living with these stories for a while, I have come to reckon that if there is such a person, it is Saul's son Jonathan. One might reckon that the general atmosphere of ambiguity and the stress on human frailty that permeates these chapters must also embrace Jonathan. The reason for his commitment to David is his resentment at his father and/or his awareness that as the old king's son he is in a very vulnerable position in relation to the new king. This is how it would be in *film noir*. But there the frailty that characterizes even the goodies is eventually made clear, even if only in the last reel. Like films, Old Testament storytelling is inclined to 'show' rather than 'tell'. It portrays people doing things and it is sparing about telling you their motives and feelings. You have to work that out from their words and deeds. Jonathan remains unique in these stories in the fact that the story offers no specific pointers to a suspicious reading of his character, of the kind it gives in connection with everyone else.

Reckless and Inspiring Love (i)

Jonathan was a man who inspired love. When the Philistines were at the height of their pressure on Israel, Jonathan had persuaded his armour-bearer to join him in that hare-brained scheme to attack the Philistine garrison at Michmash, which we looked at from Saul's angle in chapter 6. Hare-brained it may have been, but it was also the fruit of faith. Jonathan knew that Yahweh was alive and powerful and had the capacity to bring about amazing deliverance, though he also knew that you cannot be sure when Yahweh will act in that way. 'It may be

that Yahweh will act for us, because nothing can hinder Yahweh from saving by many or by few' (14:6). Jonathan knew that you need faith in God's power if you are to do bold things in God's name, but you may not be sure whether God will use that power. It is like praying for someone's healing. You do not necessarily have to know before you start that what you ask for is God's will. There is risk involved. And Jonathan inspires his armour-bearer to take the risk with him: 'Do all that your mind inclines to. I'm with you' (14:7). I confess that I have sometimes prayed without even being sure of God's power, and God has answered my prayer, which again shows that God does not feel obliged to be bound by the rules we are supposed to accept.

They climb down into the ravine and up the other side towards the Philistine garrison, deliberately letting the Philistines see them and giving them the chance to infer that (for instance) they are deserters. Within the Philistine army there are already a number of 'Hebrews.' To us that inevitably suggests Israelites, but the way the word is used in the Old Testament (and the way similar words are used in other texts) suggests it is a broader word than that. It could cover people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but they were always marginal people, outside the main structures of the society. They resemble the immigrant groups you find scattered through much of the modern world, sometimes on different sides of divisions and conflicts that reflect geographical or national boundaries. It is often vital for such groups to protect their vulnerable position by identifying with the power of the day, and some 'Hebrews' had done that. We know, because once the Israelites had defeated the Philistines, the story tells us that the Hebrews in the Philistine army changed sides.

The Philistine garrison assumes that Jonathan and his armour-bearer have seen which side their own bread is buttered, and it falls for their ploy. Before it knows what is happening, the guard is dead and the camp is in a panic, assuming that there is a whole army behind the two young men. Indeed there is, as soon as Saul discovers what is going on. The bright idea becomes the beginning of a famous victory that can push the Philistines off the mountain ridge down to where they belong on the coastal plain.

We have noted that there is then an odd footnote to this story - or rather, the story of one young man inspiring another young man to take part in a crazy venture has become the basis for discussing another issue. Saul promises God that everyone will fast until they have completed this victory, unfortunately no one tells Jonathan, and Jonathan is doomed. But the army as a whole will not have it. They ransom Jonathan, which must involve giving something valuable to Yahweh to replace what Saul had promised. We do not know what that was, but by definition it cost them. That is the kind of person Jonathan was, the kind of love he inspired.

Reckless and Giving Love

Not surprisingly, that is also the kind of love this attractive adventurer showed, specifically to David. It is his downfall, though maybe also his making, for love is like that.

When Jonathan first meets David, the NRSV has Jonathan's 'soul' being bound to him and Jonathan loving David as his own 'soul' (18:1). This gives a more ethereal impression than is appropriate. The word translated 'soul' refers to the inner being, the person, the self, the 'spirit' (NIV), even the appetite. In 2:16 it referred to Eli's sons' appetite for meat. To begin with, presumably Jonathan was as struck by David's looks as anyone else.

Sometimes you can meet someone and watch them do something or hear them talk and you can realize quite quickly 'I could go a long way with this person.' Before you have a lot of concrete evidence of who this person is, you can get

attracted to them on the basis of a hunch as to who they are. One can see why that happened to Jonathan when David met his father. There is something of the same flamboyant adventurer about both these young men. If the story of the taking of the Philistine garrison had been told of David, we would have had no trouble believing it. For that matter, if it had been told of a younger Saul we would have believed it, if it had been prefaced by the information that Yahweh's spirit had overwhelmed him. Such capacities had been there in Saul, but they needed bringing out.

Jonathan is his father's son in having the capacities, and he does not need to be overwhelmed by Yahweh's spirit in order for them to find expression. It is a marvellous thing when your children can do the things that you cannot, or when they can do easily what you find very hard work. When Jonathan meets David, he cannot but reach out to him. It will not exactly be the death of him, though it is interesting to speculate what would have happened to Saul and David and Yahweh's purpose if he had not reached out like that. It will certainly complicate his life.

Of course the same is true of Saul himself and his relationship with David. Perhaps one thing that made Saul love David (16:21) was that he saw in him things that he knew were buried deep in himself but that he had a harder time giving expression to in the right way. And for Saul, loving David means promoting the person who will replace him as king, as for Jonathan loving David means getting involved with the person who will displace him as heir apparent. But Jonathan was not the kind of person who did anything in life in a spirit of calculation, and this was what distinguished him and David and made David a person who could fit into the role of king more easily. Jonathan reminds me of Mark Knopfler's song about the woman who values 'love over gold.' She walks out on the high wire, she dances on thin ice, she pays no heed to the danger and even less to other people's advice, she throws love to all the strangers and caution to the wind. Even though she knows that the things that you hold can fall and be shattered or run through your fingers like dust, she still values love over gold.

Thus Jonathan made a covenant with David. So the NIV and the NRSV, though the King James Version has Jonathan and David making a covenant, and there is an oddity about the Hebrew that makes it ambiguous. It is fortuitously so. We have seen that Jonathan is the great risk-taker and we will discover that David is the great calculator, who values power over love (it will be Solomon who values gold over love, perhaps). If you are a calculator you do not take risks in relationships, and you may simply use them. Jonathan's commitment to David will be crucial to David's survival and to his move towards the throne. I do not know how far initially David simply used Jonathan cynically, but we are never told that David loved Jonathan back, or actually that David ever loved anyone. David was someone who inspired love rather than gave it.

On the other hand we are told that David wept in Jonathan's arms (20:41), and after his death he wondered at Jonathan's love for him and spoke of how dear Jonathan was to him (2 Samuel 1:26: again NIV gives a more appropriate impression than NRSV's 'beloved'). Jonathan took David as close to loving someone as David could ever get, and he did it by being like him and by loving him. Perhaps David thereby almost became able to love himself and therefore to love someone else. It may thus have been Israel's great tragedy as well as David and Jonathan's that Jonathan died at just the moment when David was going to need him even more than he had done during Saul's life. No one would ever replace Jonathan, and David's personal story would be all downhill from then on.

So the ambiguity is telling. It is furthered by the use of the actual word 'covenant.' The Hebrew word *berit* covers the ground of pledge, covenant, agreement, alliance, contract, and treaty in English. It can thus be more one-sided, like God's covenant with Noah, or more two-sided, like the covenant in Deuteronomy. It can be more relational, like God's covenant with Abraham, or

more legal, like Abraham's covenant with Abimelech in Genesis 21. The marriage covenant is a bit of both. What was the nature of this covenant between Jonathan and David? When God makes a covenant with David, like Jonathan God reaches out to David one-sidedly, as God had to Abraham (see 2 Samuel 7; the word 'covenant' actually comes in 2 Samuel 23:5 - see also Psalm 132). Perhaps God, too, is involved in trying unsuccessfully to win David into a more relational way of being. When David is involved in making a covenant, it has more conditions attached to it. It is more calculating and contractual, with no time for anyone's feelings (see 2 Samuel 3:12-16). Indeed, David's own comments on God's covenant with him (2 Samuel 23:5) provide part of the evidence that David's attitude to covenants remained intrinsically contractual. Yes, God failed.

Everything would therefore make one assume that a covenant relationship meant one thing to Jonathan and another to David. For Jonathan it was a characteristically risky expression of love, though he probably did not think about the risk element, in a relationship in which he was prepared to invest himself. Investing himself did not mean sitting around having navel-gazing conversations (I write as one who can enjoy such conversations). It meant risking his future, risking what we might call his career, though no-one has a career in a traditional society. This was to be a relationship without which he might have kept his position as heir apparent.

From the very beginning it is as if he can see that and face it. In another extravagant Jonathan-gesture he strips off his coat and armour and sword and bow and belt and gives them to David. David will need proper clothes for court. He may have found such equipment useless in the fight with Goliath, but his style is going to have to change now. David is on the move towards being Saul's successor, as Saul can soon see (18:8), and the man who might have expected to occupy that place is the man who gives him the wherewithal to begin the move towards replacing him. Jonathan acknowledges by his actions (whatever went through his conscious mind) what Saul will steadfastly resist by his actions, beginning when Saul starts 'eyeing' David with anxiety, jealousy, and hostility (18:9). Had it not been for his commitment to David, indeed, Jonathan might well have kept his life, as David would have had a harder time keeping his own. Certainly it meant risking his life in trying to mediate between his friend and his father.

The threefold relationship between Jonathan, David, and Saul is introduced in an interesting way. David was in conversation with Saul (18:1a). As a result Jonathan was attracted to David (18:1b). Saul insisted that David joins his household (18:2). Jonathan made a covenant with David (18:3) and gave him his coat and armour and sword and bow and belt (18:4). David fulfilled Saul's commissions (18:5a). Saul put David over the army (18:5b). Actually there is no three-way relationship. There are only two-way relationships between Saul and David and between Jonathan and David, and between Saul and Jonathan by virtue of their being father and son. The manner in which the relationship between Jonathan and David is introduced foreshadows the problems it will lead to.

This relationship will cost Jonathan hugely in his relationship with his father, because he has to attempt the impossible task of being loyal to his father and loyal to his friend. Parents and leaders expect loyalty to them to mean taking their side whatever happens. Loyalty is the supreme good. It is in this sense that his task was impossible. There is a powerful Danish (?) film called *The Celebration*, which portrays a man's sixtieth-birthday party that his son 'ruins' by exposing his father's abuse of him and of his twin sister who committed suicide. Part of the 'scandal' - not of the abuse but of the exposure - is that he should so be disloyal. I have decided not to have a sixtieth birthday party.

A supreme loyalty we owe to leaders and parents is that as followers and offspring we value truth over gold. If we are leaders or parents, it is a supreme loyalty that we look for in our followers or children. In that sense there is never any such thing as a conflict of loyalties. The conflict concerns whether we have the courage to speak and whether we manage to speak the truth in love. It would be nice to be able to feel that the decision to impeach President Clinton, which was made over this past weekend as I write, had been made on that basis. The media have rather been seeing it as a piece of political calculation on the part of the impeachment party. In Britain the minority party in Parliament is called 'Her Majesty's loyal opposition'. Precisely when they are pressing Her Majesty's government they are acting loyally to the monarch and to the people.

So David won Jonathan. Jonathan loved him. Saul loved him. The women sang his praises (18:6-7). Yahweh was with him (18:12, 14, 18). The whole nation loved him (18:16). Saul's daughter Michal loved him (18:20). The only person apparently immune to his charms, as we have seen, is Saul's elder daughter, Merab, who by the whim of her father nearly ends up married to him, but by another whim of her father escapes to blessed obscurity with Adriel the Meholathite (18:17-19).

And all this seems to happen without David knowing what he is doing, and certainly without attempting to do it. He is not trying to make friends at court. The fact that he apparently lacked the capacity to commit himself in the way people committed themselves to him would make it unsurprising if the whole business of the way he won people was a mystery to him. When he expresses astonishment at the idea that Saul should want him in his family (18:18, 23), perhaps that is not merely a politeness but an indication that all this was a somewhat unbelievable enigma to him. As people said exotic things about him, metaphorically he looked over his shoulder to see who they might be talking about. Each time someone was attracted to him, it was something of a surprise. But it was something he could use, perhaps without realizing that this was what he was doing. And it was something God could use in prosecuting the intent that David should replace Saul.

Reckless and Following Love

The huge success of David puts Saul in a strange position. On one hand, it means that through this agent Saul is spectacularly achieving the very point of his being on the throne. The point about kingship was to give the nation the strong leadership that would mean the reversing of that process whereby Philistia was more and more confining and controlling Israel. It was to give Israel its freedom and the possession of its land in peace. On the other hand, for a variety of reasons Saul cannot simply rejoice that his aims are being achieved through David. Indeed, he cannot see it that way at all. He can only perceive David as a threat. Irrational personal considerations come together with accurate political considerations and futile pretences about the possibility of frustrating God's purpose. Monarchy is a young institution. There is no long tradition that determines (for example) that a king is king for life. A king is much more like a dictator who comes to power through a coup and stays in power only until replaced in the next coup. We have noted already that if you want to stay in power - indeed if you want to stay alive - you have to keep watching your back. And David is (metaphorically) lurking at Saul's back. The fact that he is so successful makes him a threat.

This is not just Saul's imagination. We receive many reassurances that David has no intention of making a move on the throne, though that in itself is very suspicious. But whatever is in David's own mind, his success and everyone's adoration of him make him a serious threat. It is necessary to get rid of him.

The stability of the infant state is more important than the military successes he can bring. This becomes not merely a matter of an unpremeditated lunge with a spear in a fit of temper but of serious cool conversation with his son and his servants.

The trouble is that Jonathan knows where his loyalty now lies. The benefit that David's death would mean to him, removing the threat to his own succession, means nothing in the context of the love that David has won from him. He knows he has to tell David what is going on and warn him to stay out of Saul's way. He also knows that he is the only person in a position to try to help Saul see sense, for all the risk to his own position in confronting his volatile father. David has done no wrong by Saul and Saul should not wrong him. He has served Saul by the way he has acted and has risked his own life. Saul has seen this in the battle with Goliath and has rejoiced in the way Yahweh used it to bring great deliverance to Israel at the time. He has no business doing wrong by an innocent man now.

Jonathan tells it straight and he tells it theologically. He talks about Yahweh and about salvation (NRSV and NIV 'victory') and about joy and about innocence, and three times he uses the word 'sin.' It is not a word that often comes in conversations between sons and fathers, and not a word that has been uttered in these chapters for a while, since Samuel was confronting Saul at Gilgal after the defeat of Amalek. Jonathan speaks to his father in the manner of a prophet. Yet the sin he speaks of is the sin of one human being against another. We have moved from Genesis 3 with the taking of fruit and the terrible consequences of what might look like a trivial act of disobedience, to Genesis 4 with the taking of a life - actual or intended.

Perhaps only Jonathan could get away with this speech, and Saul cannot but yield to his argument, but neither can he sustain the conviction that Jonathan is right. In another fit of temper Saul lunges at David, then a piece of cooler plotting ends up in a farcical bungled attempt to get his staff to kill him (more of that in a later chapter). The next time David meets Jonathan, understandably he sounds not too impressed with the fruits of Jonathan's efforts to fix things between him and Saul. 'What have I done?', he asks (20:1), just as he had asked his brothers when he was in trouble with them (17:29). Is David always the little boy bewildered about the way people treat him? But he is less naive than Jonathan about how predictable Saul can be and how sure Jonathan can be that he will know everything Saul intends. He is able to see, as Jonathan is not, that Jonathan cannot expect to maintain the same relationship with his father when his father knows of this deep friendship with the person his father would like to kill.

David's questions draw Jonathan into an even deeper expression of his commitment to David, an even more explicit indication that like Saul he recognizes that David is on the way to the throne, but that unlike Saul he accepts that (20:12-17). Behind David's questions about Saul are questions about Jonathan. Trusting Jonathan means putting his life in the hands of the person who has most to profit from his death, the son and heir of the man who wants to kill him. Jonathan promises on oath that he will tell David whatever he discovers from Saul.

He prays for Yahweh to be with David as he had been with Saul. Given that we may think that Yahweh dealt with Saul rather toughly, this might seem a backhanded prayer. But Jonathan has in mind the way Yahweh took Saul as king and initially worked through him. In effect Jonathan is praying that Yahweh may make David Saul's successor - which means that he himself would not be. To David he says, 'show me the kind of commitment that Yahweh does, as long as I live. But if I die, do not ever cut off your commitment to my family, not even when Yahweh has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth'.

The questions about how this relationship may turn out are two-sided. By his commitment to David, Jonathan is not only surrendering his claim to the throne. He is risking his life. The story of his unintended breaking of Saul's fast and Saul's willingness to sacrifice him for the sake of his promise has already shown that Jonathan had better take nothing for granted from Saul. And if Saul were to discover that Jonathan was the focus of disloyalty in his own household, he would be unlikely to receive any mercy.

Actually that is not how things will work out. In a strange way, and quite literally, he will stand by his father at the end of the life of both of them, and in that sense will maintain his loyalty to him even while he maintains his loyalty to David. For there are other ways in which the 'if I die' question might work itself out, and Jonathan is looking the general possibility in the face. He is doing this very firmly in articulating the question. It is out there now, not just a half-acknowledged possibility in one secret corner of his mind.

He is also drawing attention to the way in which the risk in this relationship is two-sided. Suppose David succeeds to the throne. Yes, the first thing a new leader does is safeguard his back. David will have to do that. He would certainly have advisers who told him that the first thing he needed to do was to get rid of anyone who had anything to do with Saul, who might in due course become a focus of disaffection. Jonathan is prepared to risk his love, but he is not a fool. He knows something of the nature of the risk. Perhaps he has even reflected on the way power has changed his father, and begun to wonder how it will change David.

Perhaps that also made it easy for him to accept Yahweh's will that David, not he, should be the next king of Israel. It may be another way in which he showed himself to be no fool. Perhaps he, too, knows Jotham's fable (Judges 9) and know that only a fool wants to be a king. Jonathan has all the charismatic verve that would make people enthuse over him as king, and the average man would be excited at the chance to gain such power. Men do try to get into positions of power. But power corrupts. Jonathan fears it may corrupt David, and perhaps he knew it might corrupt him, and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw where Yahweh's will was pointing.

So Jonathan wants an undertaking from David that when he reaches his destiny, this will not mean that he no longer shows that God-like commitment to Jonathan's family. And for his own part he once again makes a covenant with David. Indeed, it is not a covenant with David alone but with 'David's house', David's dynasty. How far ahead this commitment looks, at the moment when David is a man on the run! There was a time when Yasser Arafat was in exile from Palestine, or Nelson Mandela was in prison in South Africa, both of them twenty years away from being the president of their people. It seemed an extraordinary act of hope for their supporters to pledge their allegiance against the day when the revolution would come in their countries, and it was easy to think that they were fooling themselves because they had no alternative. Jonathan has other alternatives, and he still commits himself.

'May Yahweh seek out the enemies of David', he declares. A large part of the point of such a prayer (like the one in a passage such as Psalm 139:19-24) is to prove that you really are committed, otherwise you are asking for Yahweh to seek you out. But in turn, 'Jonathan again made David swear, on the basis of his love for him, because he loved him as he loved his own self'. The pronouns are ambiguous, but I presume that here, as elsewhere, it is Jonathan who does the loving. It is Jonathan's love that puts the energy into this relationship. But he is also making sure that the commitment is not wholly one-sided. And he wants David also to remember that this mutual commitment is undertaken before Yahweh: 'Yahweh is witness between you and me for ever' 20:23).

Soon there is a formal dinner which David and Jonathan have agreed it would be wise for David to miss. Jonathan gives David's spurious apologies and Saul

can see through them. He explodes. 'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!' (20:30). One wonders whether his mother was within earshot, but then the patriarchalism of the society would likely also mean that the women were not invited to the banquets. 'You have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother who bore you.' While Saul may have thought that a more polite reference to her was appropriate to counterbalance the first, more likely she is just being used by Saul's rhetoric in a different way.

'Choose' is a striking verb. It is the first explicit reference to David's being chosen, and it comes on the lips of Saul to refer to the action of Jonathan. Saul knows that he had been the one who was chosen by Yahweh and by the people (10:24; 12:13). He half-knows that Yahweh's choice has moved on, but his half-acknowledgment of that is matched by the fact that Yahweh has only half-said it. Samuel knew that Yahweh had not chosen any of David's brothers, but the verb was not actually applied to David, either (16:8-12). Eventually David will claim Yahweh's choice over against Saul in the course of a marital argument. It would be a strong card to be able to play, especially against a wife who starts speaking her mind (2 Samuel 6:21). And eventually Yahweh will at last personally agree with David, though only after his death (1 Kings 8:16). But it is Saul and Jonathan who first mark David as chosen.

With further irony, Saul is absolutely right about the implication of Jonathan's choice. 'As long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth,' he begins. He cannot bring David's name onto his own lips. For the third time in the conversation he refers to him dismissively as 'the son of Jesse.' 'As long as he lives, neither you nor your kingship will be established.' The difference is that Jonathan is relaxed about that. He had no need to be king, and therefore has no need to resist Yahweh's will. Saul has moved from fear of being king because he is not sure he is up to the position, to fear of not being king because he is not sure he can live without it. And he can only reject his own son because (to anticipate those words of David to Michal) Jonathan has chosen David rather than Saul. The spear is soon being ineffectively lunged in Jonathan's direction.

Next day Jonathan keeps a secret rendezvous with David. David falls to the ground before Jonathan, and they embrace, and kiss, and weep - David more than Jonathan (20:41). What do the prostration and the weeping mean? Typically, the story does not make this explicit. It leaves us to work it out. Partly that may reflect the fact that someone who falls and weeps does not necessarily quite know what the falling and the weeping mean. But this moment is a turning point for the two men, and especially for David. Jonathan has proved his love for David. David bows and weeps. Saul and Jonathan have indicated that both know that David is on the way to the throne. David bows and weeps. David and Jonathan now know for certain that a die is cast, and from now until the end of Saul's life David is to be a man on the run. David bows and weeps. It is the last but one time that David and Jonathan will meet. David bows and weeps.

'Go in peace,' says Jonathan, 'for the two of us have taken an oath in Yahweh's name that Yahweh will be between you and me and between your offspring and mine for ever.' They let go of each other and there is a silence and they turn to walk in opposite directions, Jonathan to go back into the city, David to begin his life on the run.

Reckless and Winning Love (ii) (?)

Jonathan's final meeting with David is not much more than a reprise of this one. David is in hiding in the wilds, to the south at a place called Horesh. Saul's posse is looking for him but never manages to find him. Jonathan succeeds. Yahweh has been protecting him from Saul, but there is no need to protect him from Jonathan. So there Jonathan 'strengthened his hand in God' (23:16). I

imagine there was an internal and an external dimension to that. Jonathan encouraged David's spirit and built up his resolve, but talk of strengthening his 'hand' suggests that this also meant David was therefore in a better position to keep up the fight.

Jonathan reminded him that he need not be afraid. This might seem an unlikely claim, but there is more than one significance of it. In the Old Testament (and among other middle-eastern peoples) the reassurance that you do not need to be afraid appears not merely as a one given to all and sundry. It is especially one given to people in power who have grounds for finding the future extremely threatening, people like Abraham or Moses, or kings. Indirectly, Jonathan is inviting David to claim the promise of the king designate. And that is how he goes on, more directly. Saul will not be able to find David in the way that Jonathan had. David is to be king. Saul knows it. And the two of them again make a covenant, and again they let go of each other and again there is a silence and again they turn to walk in opposite directions.

And on this occasion it is for the last time. 'You will be king over Israel and I will be second to you,' Jonathan had said. The partnership has not yet seen its best days. It has been forged under pressure, but it is going to be fruitful for the two of them and for the whole people.

If only. There is another battle between Philistia and Israel at the northern extreme of Saul's fiefdom, where the mountains of Ephraim fall into the plain that divides them from Galilee. It is again border country, because as usual the more sophisticated Philistines control the plains and the more primitive Israelites control the mountains. It anticipates the way that the Palestinians have more recently controlled the mountains and the Israelis the plains. The Philistines win an overwhelming victory and Jonathan loses his life.

We are told nothing of how this happens. We hear no last words. Instead we hear of David's reaction, and we hear of the death lament he wrote for Jonathan and his father. It is addressed to the Israelite people. It closes (2 Samuel 1:25-26) like this.

I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother;
You meant so much to me.
Your love for me was extraordinary,
More so than a woman's.
Oh, mighty ones have fallen;
Weapons of war have perished.

At the end of the film *The Hustler*, "Fast" Eddie at last speaks of his love for Sarah, when she is too dead to hear him. He at last acknowledges how her love has reached inside him, and he shows us how her love and her death have contributed decisively to the shaping of a character who can now make the most of his talent.

Even at the end David cannot use the L-word of his own feelings for Jonathan, but there is no doubt that Jonathan has reached him as no one else ever did. Jonathan's love for David has penetrated inside David even as it has made it possible for Yahweh's purpose to be fulfilled. Love does not always do that. Knowing that someone loves you may simply be embarrassing or complicating or tiresome. But one of the factors that generate friendship is the awareness that this is a person a bit like yourself, someone who ticks the way you do. We have seen that Jonathan was rather like David in several respects, though he lacked some of David's weaknesses. Indeed, one wonders why God chose David rather than Jonathan. Perhaps it was because Jonathan was too nice a guy to be king. You need a kind of ruthlessness and a kind of hunger that Jonathan lacked. But God's choices are usually inexplicable, so it is fruitless to speculate as to

why God preferred a man who looks rather less well-qualified for the job than the man whom God did in the end sacrifice to Saul's stupidity.

There is one further connection in which Jonathan is referred to in the story. Jonathan has a five-year-old son. His name is Mephibosheth - or rather that is the book's name for him. His real name seems to have been Meribaal, but we know that the authors of this book understandably hated names that looked as if they honoured Baal and therefore bowdlerized them; *bosheth* means 'shame'. When the news about the battle at Jezreel and the death of Saul and the death of Jonathan came though, on some assumptions Jonathan's son becomes the most important person in the kingdom. He is also a person in great danger, if people who want someone else to succeed to the throne should reach him. His nanny therefore has the wit to flee with him to somewhere safe. Unfortunately in the haste and the chaos there is an accident and he has a fall. Perhaps he broke his ankles. Anyway, the result is that he is disabled (4:4).

Much then transpires. David becomes king over Judah, and then over northern Israel too, makes Jerusalem his capital, moves the covenant chest there, receives a breathtaking promise from Yahweh about future success and the permanence of his line, deals with external enemies, and has other middle-eastern peoples lying awake at night worrying whether they would be his next victims. He also watches potential rivals in Israel be eliminated. And Mephibosheth grows up - he himself has a son by the time he is next mentioned.

In due course David asks, 'Is there anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show commitment for Jonathan's sake?' (9:1). 'Commitment' is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which NRSV translates 'kindness'. That rather misses the point. *Hesed* is a word closely related to faithfulness. It suggests outrageous acts of generosity that establish a relationship, or outstanding acts of faithfulness that arise from a relationship and express it even when it has been under terrible pressure and the other party has forfeited any right to faithfulness. David is not a person especially marked out by 'kindness'. At this moment he is fresh from killing 18,000 Edomites (8:13). That is the way he 'won a name for himself'. But David is a man who keeps his commitments.

Saul's remaining second cousins do not take that for granted, however. They know about the 18,000 Edomites and they know mafia-speak when they hear it. David wants to make a gesture to Saul's family? Within five minutes they have grown beards or shaved them off, packed their bags and disappeared into the wilderness. If they do not disappear they will disappear (if you see what I mean). Their days are numbered.

David's heavies knock on the door of one of Saul's staff in the middle of the night, drag him out of bed, and frog-march him to David. 'I am at your service', he declares as he quakes before the king fresh from those 18,000 killings. Yes, Jonathan himself had a son, but he is disabled as the result of an accident. He cannot walk properly. This might mean he is disqualified from being king, for kings were expected to be handsome like David. It does not mean that politicians who had supported Saul might have had no thoughts of making him a puppet-king. It might have seemed implausible that this should be the issue after all these years. But there will be subsequent occasions when people who have not forgotten Saul or people who were related to Saul will come out of the woodwork as potential replacements for David or potential supporters of such candidates. Indeed, that will be said of Meribaal (16:1-4; 19:24-30), though the story does not quite express an opinion on whether it was true, or on whether David thought it was true.

Meribaal appears before David and falls on his face and does obeisance to David. He too can see the writing on the wall. The feebleness of his legs is not going to save him. If his potential as a rival for David is the issue, his link with Jonathan will save him when his useless legs cannot. It will not be the last time (see 21:7). The mafia grandfather has a soft heart. 'Do not fear', he says to the cowering disabled ex-prince, like a prophet speaking to a

king fearful of his future. David's *hesed* is on his side (9:7). Whether or not David is insecure enough that he needs worry about the disabled son of the last king, we will discover that he has reasons to feel insecure within his own family. Meribaal is to come and live at the palace. Yes, David can then keep an eye on him and hope to ensure that none of those northern politicians ever revive the idea of making him their puppet. But we can believe that there is a response here to the way that Jonathan reached inside David and a yearning for something and a longing to keep a memory alive.

Same-sex Love

The question has been raised whether the relationship of Jonathan and David was a homosexual one. If that means 'Did they have sex?', then the story neither says they did nor says they did not, nor does it offer any pointers in either direction, so that the question is a pointless one. The story's significance in the context of contemporary same-sex relationships surely lies rather in pointing to possibilities and raising questions for men to think about as we look at our relationships with other men.

The gender myths (or cultural truths) say that women are better at relationships than men, and specifically are better at same-sex relationships (perhaps *faute de mieux* - that is, other women are the only people likely to be interested in deep friendships). If so, the story encourages women to believe in the possibility of friendships with men, and men to believe in the possibility of friendships with each other and with women. Deep down inside a man there may be a relational human being to be reached. Jonathan shows that; but so does David, by virtue of the fact that he is almost reached by Jonathan. Indeed, many of the realities that the story portrays, such as the problem of differences of perception and the risk-taking in this relationship, are the ones involved in any relationships, man-man or woman-woman or woman-man.

On the other hand, there may be a more solemn implication to the fact that David never does use the L-word. On David's part, at least, friendship never gets beyond male bonding (cf Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 53). One of the features of same-sex bonding is to exclude the opposite sex. Were David and Jonathan two buddies standing shoulder to shoulder facing the enemy without looking each other in the eye, united and finding mutual strength in the expression of their machismo? We know that David did not know how to relate to women. We do not know enough about Jonathan to be sure.

10

The Man Who Learned to Lie (1 Samuel 18-31)

A friend of mine who lectures in Ethics talks as if telling the truth is the one one-negotiable virtue. In no circumstances and not in the slightest way can it be right to give someone the wrong impression. Apparently it is even wrong to attempt to mislead burglars into believing you are at home by leaving the lights on in your house when you are out. (Because many people do that, I always assume that leaving lights on is a way of telling burglars that there is no one at home.)

I recently read an article about the question 'Why be truthful'. It suggested that there could be no answer to the question. It is one of those axioms we cannot get behind, unless the answer is that such a principle is bound up in the notion of being a community or being in relationship. That conviction

corresponds to an assumption implicit in the Bible, though the Bible comes at truthfulness from a different angle from ours. Implicitly it assumes that *speaking* the truth is an aspect of the total truthfulness of a relationship.

The story of Jonathan and David is a story about a truthful relationship, a relationship in which each is faithful to the other. There would be no place for lying there. At another extreme, the Bible implies that the powerless owe no obligation of truthfulness to the powerful - though the powerful owe truthfulness to the powerless. In between, when there are relationships between people but these relationships are in trouble, people may be economical with truth(fulness). When God deceives people who are in the wrong, the Bible sees no problem. When God deceives people who are in the right, people who are God's servants, then it sees a huge problem. Paradoxically, the one central character in the stories we are reading who meets my friend's standard of behaviour is Saul. Saul is a man who always tells the truth. All the other major characters (Samuel, Jonathan, David...) from time to time say things that are not true. Yet they of course are nearer to being the people of truth in this story.

Politics is a hard context in which to be truthful. It was a civil servant in Britain who became notorious and gained his place in the dictionary of creative English for the claim that he had not lied but had simply been 'economical with the truth'. I have not heard that phrase in these days of impeachment in the USA, but it would have been a useful one if it could be used without irony. Actually, it is a rather neat phrase. We are all involved in such economies from time to time. The Nora Ephron/Meg Ryan/Tom Hanks romantic comedy *You've Got Mail* involves Hanks in some necessary economies (I do not recall actual lying) on the way to the eventual inevitable but tissue-inducing kiss.

David's political career (indeed, as far as the story is concerned, his life) starts with an economy. It is not his but (of all people?) Samuel's, or rather Yahweh's. Yahweh tells Samuel to go and anoint one of Jesse's sons. 'Saul will kill me', Samuel points out. Given what will follow, he is not exaggerating. 'OK,' says Yahweh, 'tell them you have come for a sacrifice'. It was true, of course, but it was designed to be misleading. Yahweh was telling Samuel to be wise as a serpent, from whom humanity received its first examples of economy with the truth - the serpent says nothing that is not true. Yahweh also wants him to be harmless as a dove, which could not be said of the serpent. When we are inclined to be economical, or even to lie, as David will, the second requirement will help us to test whether this is an occasion when it is proper to do so, or whether (for instance) we are just trying to serve ourselves.

David the Shrewd

David is someone who advances his political and military career from the beginning by being wise. One of the first characterizations of him was as 'prudent in speech' (16:18). He has already demonstrated his capacity not to take 'No' for an answer in the way he prevails over his brothers' dismissiveness and Saul's understandable skepticism about this teenager's capacity to take on Goliath. He knows how to handle words, knows what to say at the right moment, not least if he was to get his way. The story four times tells us about how successful he was (18:5, 14, 15, 30), but each time it uses a word which usually means to have insight or behave with insight. It is actually the word used in Genesis 3 to describe the tree's fruit as desirable to make one wise. From the beginning, while one key to David's success was the fact that Yahweh was with him, another key was the fact that he behaved with insight. The word can even suggest being crafty, as the word 'shrewd' applied to the serpent can elsewhere suggest either a virtue or a vice. It is a useful asset for anyone, but an

especially important asset for a king, and an even more important one if you have to win an election in order to become king.

Napoleon is said to have asked regarding men who might be promoted to a senior rank in his army, 'Is he lucky?' What Napoleon meant is that people often seem to manufacture their own luck. Some sixth sense enables them to be in the right place at the right time, or to be out of the wrong place. I have sometimes reflected on the fact that I feel I have always been 'lucky' in this sense, with the trivial exception of falling in love with someone who would turn out to have multiple sclerosis and end up in a wheelchair. In the last chapter I will note how I then compounded my bad luck and would therefore have deserved to fail Napoleon's test. I would not have got promoted, which suits me fine. Perhaps Napoleon would have sent me home.

David was lucky. When Saul threw the spear, he saw it coming, and when Saul threw it again, he saw it again. When Saul hoped the Philistines would kill him, they failed. Saul was unlucky. When the marriage price for Michal is the death of a hundred Philistines or two, David pays it without losing his own life (18:27). When Saul's men come to arrest David, they give him enough time for Michal to point out to him that it would be wise to get out of here. When they eventually present their search warrants, they proceed with Chaplinesque stupidity while David sets several days' distance between himself and them, aided by a deception or three on Michal's part (19:11-17). Even Yahweh gets involved in putting Saul off the scent (19:18-24).

The story also portrays David as a man of honour in his relationship with Saul. Twice the king promises his daughter in marriage, and twice David responds with a speech of inordinate political correctness about what a great honour it is for a commoner like him to become a member of the king's family (19:17-24). One would be tempted to read this ironically were it not for the stance that David takes to Saul later, when he twice has opportunity to kill Saul but refuses to do so because he refuses to lay his hand on Yahweh's anointed. Admittedly this part of the story may have been originally intended to defend David from any charge of having engineered his way to the throne. It also leaves open the possibility that there was a very good reason for David to encourage the notion that you never lay hands on Yahweh's anointed: he is himself now Yahweh's anointed.

For we have noted that David is no fool. He is less transparently unscrupulous than Jacob is, but the difference may be in the degree of transparency rather than in the degree of unscrupulousness. He is certainly not gullible. He has fewer illusions about Saul than Jonathan has as Saul's son. He does not even take Jonathan for granted. After all, Jonathan has more to gain from his death than anyone has. David has seen buddy-buddy movies, but he has also seen movies in which it is your best friend who betrays you, and he is not going to decide which kind of movie this is until the last reel. For the foreseeable future David's decisive attitude needs to be fear. When you are on the run, there is huge risk in trusting anyone. Fear may be no recipe for long-term human wholeness, but in circumstances like David's it can keep you alive for a while. You can think about wholeness later, if you remember.

David's own first lie, aided and abetted by Jonathan, is an inversion of Samuel's. There is to be a formal dinner, and David gets Jonathan to say that David is missing because he has gone to Bethlehem for a festival. The lie works to expose Saul (as if he needed exposing), who explodes. Yes, David had better be on the run henceforth.

He goes first to Nob, where apparently the shrine and the covenant chest are now located. The chest may have moved there because the Philistines have destroyed Shiloh (cf Jeremiah 7:12), or alternatively because Nob is nearer Saul's base at Gibeah. Both are probably just north of Jerusalem. The senior priest there, Ahimelech, is petrified by David's arrival. No doubt gossip about Saul's hostility to David travelled fast in official circles, and Ahimelech

knows that association with David could be very dangerous. Yet it will also become clear that Ahimelech also knows which side he must take, which would be another reason for his fear about the future.

Out comes David's second lie: actually, he is on a mission for the king and is on his way to meet other people on the king's behalf. They need something to eat. All Ahimelech has is holy bread (this seems as implausible as David's story). His question is, are the non-existent men ceremonially pure? Certainly they are, David assures him. David also needs armoury: he left too quickly on this urgent mission for the king to be able to bring any (presumably this was also why he had no time for the palace kitchen to prepare him a picnic lunch). He takes Goliath's sword. He also notices the presence at Nob of a member of Saul's staff called Doeg, and he knows that this is a dangerous fact, but he does nothing about it. A decent Western hero or twentieth-century spy would have killed Doeg, as David realizes after having time to watch a large number of made-for-video films during the long winter evenings at Adullam. Eventually David regretfully acknowledges this failure (22:22), though it must be said that his words contain no actual admission of regret or remorse or guilt or sadness of the kind he later expresses for Saul himself.

Doeg's presence would be another reason for Ahimelech himself to be apprehensive. Any such fear was justified. Doeg's presence and David's lies and Ahimelech's compliance with his requests will mean Ahimelech's death when Saul learns of it (22:6-23). What at first looks like another lie, on Doeg's part, offers the most convincing evidence for hanging Ahimelech. He tells Saul that Ahimelech prayed for David. But Ahimelech does not deny doing so, and it seems likely that Doeg is another person who tells the truth, like Saul.

David is prudent in speech all right, and it saves him, but it kills Ahimelech, who is not prudent in speech. Ahimelech lacks the shrewdness of David or of the serpent in Eden. He apparently fails to guess what David's visit, David's lies, his own refusal to tell some lies, and his pressing of some home truths on Saul, would mean. They would bring not only his death but also the killing of the entire ministry team at Nob, except for one who escaped. They would bring the murder of their wives and their grown-up children and their little children. They would also mean the slaughter of the domestic animals, the story adds, making this a grotesque parody of the kind of slaughter that Saul failed to implement when Yahweh required it of enemies. The house of Eli thus comes to the end that has been hanging over it since the time of Eli (2:33), though it does turn out to be a more honourable end than we might have expected.

David the Outlaw

So what do you do when you are in trouble with your own side, as David is? You go and join the other side, or at least you pretend to go and join the other side. David is no man to do this by half-measures. He goes to Gath, where Goliath came from. We do not discover what story he told there, but evidently the king is taken in by it. The problem is that his staff are less gullible and can tell that his passport is a forgery, though they apparently fail to recognize Goliath's sword. Furthermore, they are well aware of which way the wind is blowing in Israel. 'Isn't this David, the king of the land?' they ask. They are among those examples in the Old Testament of people who can recognize what Yahweh is doing better than some of Yahweh's own people can. But for David, 'David, the king of the land' is a dangerous recognition. Once again he is justifiably scared and once again fear inspires a deception of the person in power. David behaves as if the pressure has disturbed him mentally, and Achish withdraws his visa and puts him on the first flight out of Gath. He goes on to rebuke his staff for granting him a visa in the first place, which is hard on

them because the story reads as if it was Achish who welcomed him in the first place, but people in power can be like that.

So David becomes an outlaw. He belongs to no society except one that gathers around him. He takes refuge at Adullam, a few miles from Gath and apparently in the panhandle between territory controlled by Philistia and territory controlled by Saul. It is just the place for an outlaw living on the margins. In the classic pattern, the potential leader of a revolution gathers round him other people disillusioned with the government who have nothing to lose by associating with someone who may bring about political and economic change.

Saul nervously points out to his staff that they have done well out of his rule. It would not be in their interests to think about backing David, would it (22:7)? He would be wiser to get nervous about the presumably larger number of people who have not done well out of Saul's rule, even if it was not his fault (22:2). Actually a king is a king is a king and there is little to choose between them in terms of the way they fulfil Samuel's warnings about what kings are like (8:11-17), but people live with that strange illusion that a change of government may mean things get better. And if you back the right side at the right moment, they may get better for you personally, at least until the next change.

The people who join David also include the one priest who escaped the massacre at Nob, Abiathar, who as descendant of Eli and ultimately of Aaron will provide for David and his company an important link with Israel's past and with God's regular way of guiding Israel. That will be politically important as well as religiously important. It constitutes another indication that Israel's real future with God lies with David, not with Saul. The people who join David include his brothers, too. They have evidently come a long way from their contempt in chapter 17, though no doubt their mind was wonderfully concentrated by a realization of the peril David's family will be in from a Saul with revenge in mind. The situation is too dangerous for their parents, who will be getting old, and David finds refuge for them the other side of the mountains and the other side of the Jordan in Moab. It is where his great-grandmother, Ruth, came from, but it would look like an act of some treachery given that there is no love lost between Moab and Israel.

As events unfold, the wisdom of this measure becomes clear. David acts to rescue the people of Keilah from being harried by the Philistines, but then has to move quickly because they evidently think they are safer keeping in with the government than with these outlaws. Deception works both ways. To judge from what we are told in the story, capturing David becomes Saul's number one priority. One might call it his obsession, but he is right that David is the number one threat to his own position.

In the combination of seriousness and humour, poignancy and tragedy, the story comes more and more to resemble *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. When the film *Prince of Egypt* was released, in the Hollywood-dominated area where I live every newspaper and tv magazine ran a feature on it. Among other things, they wanted to compare it with other movie versions of the Moses story. The thing that strikes me about these is that the epic approach can never do justice to the dynamics of the biblical stories. But there is a wonderful film to be made about Saul and/or David (two, perhaps) that would interweave tragedy and humour, drama and human relationships, with spectacular middle-eastern scenery and a final shoot-out and bodies hanging on the walls of Beth-Shean, and lots of material available for a sequel.

I anticipate. For several chapters David is on the run, but Saul can never find him. We have noted that Jonathan manages to do so. Both Saul's failure and Jonathan's success are signs that Yahweh is with David. There are two humorous moments when Saul's pursuit of David could have led to his own death. Again you may feel that once is plausible but twice stretches the imagination further than it will go, as is the case with the three Genesis stories about a

man passing off his wife as his sister. But the point these stories are making is clear. David is a man who is economical with the truth in our sense, but spendthrift with truthfulness in his relationship with Saul. That is because Saul is the man Yahweh anointed as king, and another man has no right to lay a hand on the one on whom Yahweh has laid hand like that (even a man himself anointed as king).

First David is hiding out in a deep cave and Saul chooses just that cave to go to the bathroom (as Americans say). Later and more prosaically Saul's posse is encamped for the night and David's intelligence tells him where they are. Each time David has Saul personally at his mercy. Each time his men urge him to kill Saul, concluding that Yahweh has given his adversary into his hand. Each time David makes a gesture to prove the point: he cuts the edge off Saul's coat and he takes Saul's spear and water-jar. Each time David then confronts Saul from a safe distance and draws attention to the way he had had him at his mercy but would not lay a hand on Yahweh's anointed (indeed, David even feels bad about defacing the king's robe). He will leave it to Yahweh to see that right comes from this conflict between king and subject. Each time Saul acknowledges he is in the wrong, but each time there is no way David could trust the truthfulness of his word.

A Fool by Name and a Fool by Nature

In between the two stories of David's declining to take the opportunity to kill Saul, David is staying on the move in the Judean wastelands. He is keeping alive partly by collecting protection money from the local farmers. It is sheep-shearing time so he sends ten of his young heavies to pay his respects to a major player in the sheep-farming business called Nabal. Presumably sheep-shearing is a time when there is money about as Nabal sells his wool. Certainly it is a time when there is food about. The event is an occasion like a harvest celebration in an agricultural community.

Now one of the delights of Hebrew (maybe more than English, but maybe not) is that many words can look the same but they have different meanings. The context will usually make quite clear which word is being used. There are several Hebrew words which involve the letters *nbl* (vowels don't count as letters in Semitic languages). One means a water bottle or pitcher. Another means a lute or guitar. Another is a verb that means to languish, and it has a linked noun that means a corpse. Yet another is a verb that means be stupid, which has a linked noun meaning stupidity and a linked adjective meaning stupid. In other Semitic languages there were other *nbl* words that meant flame or sent or noble or skilled, and these may well have been known in Hebrew, too (Klein, p. 248).

The exact form of the Hebrew word for 'stupid' is *nabal* and that is the exact form of Nabal's name. This was presumably not the type of *nbl* word that his parents had in mind when they named him. Perhaps they hoped he would become a great musician. But parents can be a bit slow to see the implications of names or initials, and maybe that was the case with Nabal's. I imagine it provided his teachers with ammunition, until he perhaps grew bigger than them. But it did not hold him back from becoming the biggest sheep farmer in the area, and probably the lord of a little fiefdom in the Judean wastelands. Shepherd, guitarist: does he remind you of anyone else in this story? Is he David's alter ego? There is another play with words. Nabal is a Calebite. The letters *klb* in Hebrew are also suggestive, as the Greek translators of the Old Testament spotted. They translated the word for Calebite (which is spelled slightly oddly) as 'dog-like'. For a *keleb* is a dog.

Even before the incident we are about to read, Nabal has a reputation for being surly and mean, which in the thinking of Israelite wisdom (see Proverbs) would be signs of stupidity. We may then be surprised to be told that his wife,

Abigail, is clever and beautiful, but doubtless she did not choose Nabal. Her parents chose him for her. Perhaps Nabal was already big-time in the sheep business, and her parents thought it rather a fine match. Perhaps she agreed to the match for that reason.

Anyway David sends his young men with sharp haircuts and bulges under their jackets to pay his respects to Nabal. They point out that Nabal's shepherds have been very lucky. They have been pasturing their sheep in the area where David and his men were, but David's men have done them no harm and none of their sheep have 'disappeared.' A little consideration might be appropriate in order that this happy arrangement may continue.

'David?' says Nabal. 'David Who, exactly? Oh, I remember, the one who is on the run from King Saul. Well, these are troubled times. There are lots of bandits about. They are all much of a much-ness as far as I am concerned. I don't think I can really take food out of my shepherds' mouths to give to this one.'

The men report this to their master and the scene is set for a showdown. David cannot let Nabal insult him like this. He gathers the bulk of his men and they get ready to teach Nabal a thing or two. Meanwhile Abigail hears of it. Presumably she was not party to the diplomatic visit, which would not be women's business. But being a patriarchal society does not mean women exercise no influence. It simply means they do it another way, though they may feel that they would have less messes to clear up if they were party to what went on from the beginning. In a trice Abigail has got together 200 pitas, a couple of bottles of wine (presumably very large ones; remember, a bottle is also a *nbl*), five sheep ready for roasting, five sacks of roasted grain, a hundred bunches of raisins, and two hundred fig-cakes. She has loaded them into the back of her 4x4 and is on the way to meet David before her fool of a husband knows what is going on. She perhaps just has time for a glance in the rear-view mirror to make sure that her hair is in good order.

She knows what she is doing. Soon she meets David on his way to show Nabal what for, muttering under his breath about the good turns he has done Nabal and this is all the thanks he gets for it and it is time to show this entrepreneur a thing or two and let him know how things are in the real world (and incidentally how is David to keep his people's army intact if they have no supplies?). She jumps down to speak to David and bows extravagantly. She is so sorry. Her husband is a fool. It turns out, she herself says, that he was well-named. If she had had the opportunity to meet David's representatives herself, their reception would have been very different. She is so glad that Yahweh has graciously protected David from yet treating Nabal exactly as he deserved and thereby getting his hands dirty for such an unworthy cause. Please will David be so gracious as to accept what she brings....

She is a clever woman, and she knows how to talk theology. She knows, she goes on, that Yahweh is behind David and in front of David. She knows that David is fighting Yahweh's battles, and that Yahweh fights David's. She knows that David is thus 'bound in the bundle of the living under Yahweh's care' (25:29). She knows that when David actually reaches the throne, it will not be because he has acted to look after himself or taken the life of anyone who did not deserve it. And by the way, please will he remember her when he comes to the throne.... David halts his gang.

It is a wondrous speech. What are we to make of it? Is Abigail simply wise enough to see which way the wind is blowing and to lean into it, unlike Nabal (who cannot see it) or Saul (who will not lean into it)? Or is she wise enough to recognize the truth and embrace it? Often men like Saul and Nabal cannot afford to recognize such truth, because it is going to make a difference to their own power and position. Indirectly, this again underlines how remarkable is Jonathan's recognition of David. A woman like Abigail has less to close her eyes. Power has less opportunity to turn a woman into a fool.

Either way, pragmatically or sincerely Abigail speaks the truth - speaks the most comprehensive and powerful statement of David's relationship with Yahweh that we have heard, to be equalled in due course only by Yahweh's own statement in 2 Samuel 7. It reinforces our image of Yahweh's involvement with David and our sense of where the story has to go. And either way it hugely encourages David on his path. Abigail looks forward to a time when David will sit on Israel's throne, and envisages him being able to look back and see this as something Yahweh brought about. He had never killed anyone who did not deserve it (25:31). Yes, the story underlines David's honour in this respect (it is sandwiched between the two stories of David's resistance to the idea of killing Saul), so that one wonders whether it is another story that was designed to defend him later. Yet it may look forward with some irony. Abigail says that David will be able to look back and reflect on how he never tried to save himself (25:31). But he will actually do a fair amount of saving himself before the book is through, and how could he not do so?

Abigail turns her car round and heads off back home. Nabal is still enjoying his drinking party and is in no condition to spend quality time with his wife. Next day when he has sobered up she tells him of her trip through the wastelands and of his miscalculation at his meeting with David's men and of his narrow escape from death at David's hands. 'And his heart died within him; he became like a stone' (25:37). Ten days later, he died.

David is rather pleased. Yahweh has punished Nabal for insulting David. Abigail's opinion is not recorded. Neither is Yahweh's own. Nor has the story yet come to its astonishing ending. As quick as a flash, to judge from the way the story is told, while Abigail was still in her widow's weeds, David has proposed to Abigail. The NRSV has him 'wooing' her, which would be a new style of activity for David to be involved in. The NIV has him 'asking her to become his wife'. More literally 'David sent and spoke concerning Abigail the taking of her to him as a wife'. We do not know who were the people with whom David's representatives negotiated this matter, though they were presumably men. Certainly the expression is one that suggests that at this stage Abigail is not party to discussions. She is the subject of them.

Abigail is, after all, a fine asset, the heir to a substantial sheep farming business which might provide a long-term solution to the problem of provisioning David's gang, and also provide David with a more secure power-base in Judah. That's the kind of thing marriage is about. And Abigail knows that. When she is brought into the discussions, or rather apprised of their results, she is only too happy to comply. She knows the rules of the game, of course. David already has one or two wives, and she will not be surprised when a man of his increasing stature takes on one or two more (25:43-44). Anyway, David seems to lose interest in a woman after he has possessed them and overcome their fathers and/or original husbands (Bach, p. 38). It is one thing to respect Yahweh's anointed. It is another to start taking marriage in a romantic modern way.

Indeed, if she had been able to guess where all this would lead, she might have used her wiles to find some other destiny. But then, the fact that she could not escape marrying first a fool and then a bandit perhaps itself reflects a woman's narrow range of options in this kind of society. She is now destined to be carted off to Philistia as a result of David's continuing need to be on the run from Saul (27:2). She is destined to be captured by the Amalekites when they take Ziklag (30.3-5). And she is destined to make her final appearance as one of the six women who bear children to David in Hebron (2 Samuel 2:2; 3:3). Apart from that, she has had her fifteen minutes of fame.

David the Unscrupulous

Taking Abigail evidently solves none of David's problems. Saul still has his posse out and they will not give up until they come back with evidence of David's death. David knows that he cannot afford to trust Saul's protestations and promises after David's second refusal to kill him when he had the chance. He knows he can never be safe in Israel. So once again he goes to see Achish, the king of Gath in Philistia (27:1-2). Achish's security advisers would now have less of a case for interning David. Their intelligence would be able to confirm that Saul saw David as foe rather than friend, and keeping David alive might help destabilize Judah.

What is David's game plan? There is a frightening ambiguity about the narrator's account of David's thinking. 'David said to himself, "Now. One day I am going to perish at the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than really escaping [the verb is repeated] into the land of the Philistines"'. So he 'went over' to them. Does David mean he is prepared to give up being an Israelite and join the Philistines permanently?

Achish gave David and his men the town of Ziklag to live in, another town in panhandle territory between Philistia, Judah, and Edom. From there David could raid peoples such as the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites and tell Achish he was raiding Judah. And it gave him a position from which to gain the plunder with which he could reward his friends and thus continue to build up a power base in Judah. It is all very well to trust in God, but this evidently does not exclude being shrewd.

Achish trusted in David. He was very good at deception. But fortunately for David, Achish's colleagues could not cope with the idea of David and his men actually serving in the Philistine army fighting against Saul. 'As Yahweh lives, you have been honest, and it seems fine to me for you to join with me in the campaign. I have found no fault in you from the day you came to me until today. But the rulers do not approve of you. You will have to go back. Go peaceably. Do nothing to displease the rulers of the Philistines'. Was David thanking Yahweh in his heart for this marvellous deliverance? If so, he keeps the fact well-hidden. Indeed, in the story of his time under Achish's patronage there are no references to Yahweh except this one that comes on Achish's lips. With amazing chutzpah, outwardly David is protesting at not being allowed to join in the fight. But he has to give in.

The story of David and Achish recalls the story of David's ancestor Abraham and an earlier Philistine king (Genesis 20). Abraham also deceived the king and nearly got him into terrible trouble. Both Philistine kings also take Yahweh's name on their lips in an honourable way. Both stories provide partially-inverted accounts of how relationships with foreign peoples are supposed to work out. Abraham and his descendants were supposed to be a means of blessing for people like this. Both Abraham and David through their deception come within a whisker of causing them terrible calamity instead. If David had been allowed to join in the battle and had changed sides in the midst of it, for instance, imagine how the Philistine rulers would have treated Achish - if any of them survived. Both stories imply a marvellous intervention by Yahweh that prevents that scenario, or other scenarios one could imagine. In Genesis, Yahweh appears to the king in a dream, here Yahweh works via the Philistine rulers' own sensible instincts so that Achish is rescued from paying the penalty for being an honourable man. By implication, I think, the story recognizes the moral ambiguity in David's action, and acknowledges the honour of Achish, and has God working things out. The result is not that right is done, but at least that some of the less preferable outcomes of a messy human situation are aborted and God's own purpose is furthered. Which is as much as God can usually aim at.

What, otherwise, was David supposed to do? The story begins with his concluding that Saul is so implacably set on disposing of him that the only safety for him lies in fleeing the country (27:1). The result is that he is

caught on the wrong side when Saul fights the most important battle of his life. Although he escapes having actually to fight against Israel, neither is he fighting for Israel. While Saul is in the far north losing his life (31:1-13), David is in the far south making sure he has not lost any of his spoil (30:19). While David's army is attacking and putting to flight and dividing spoil, Saul's army is being attacked and put to flight and despoiled. The contrast is increased by the difference in the length of these two chapters, 13 verses for an army's defeat and a king's death, 31 verses for a rescue mission by someone who surely ought to have been somewhere else (Miscall). Is his absence wisdom or cowardice, an anticipation of a defeat or the cause of it?

David takes risks and gets away with them because Yahweh is with him. People have often assumed that this must imply that David was a good, straightforward, honourable, godly person. We have seen that the evidence for the latter is at best ambiguous. David is a seriously flawed great person, like many a great American president. He illustrates the rule that it may be difficult to be a great public figure and achieve a lot there, and it may be difficult to be a person of integrity and integration in your inner character and personal life, but it is ten times as difficult to be both.

And David illustrates the rule that you cannot infer from the fact that Yahweh is with someone that therefore they must be a person of integrity. Yahweh's being with someone means Yahweh blesses them in what they try to do, protects them, and gives them success. There is no necessary relationship between that success and how honourable or integrated they are as people. All the success means is that God is using this person. We have to recall this when we read David's story, and when we read our own, and when we read other people's. Many people who have done mighty works in the name of Jesus are people he has never really known.

'Who is David?', Nabal asked. The answer to Nabal's question remains complex and elusive, Cheryl Exum comments (*Tragedy*, p. 120).

11

The Man Who Could Get No Answer (1 Samuel 28; 31)

I would not be writing this book if I did not like sombre stories. I do not care much for Jane Austen with her unrealistically happy endings. Actually I know I am inconsistent, because I love Nora Ephron with her happy endings that you can see coming from the first reel in *When Harry Met Sally* or *Sleepless in Seattle* or *You've Got Mail*, so maybe it is something else I do not like about Austen. In *To the Usual Suspects* I talked about the film *Leaving Las Vegas*, the story of a Hollywood scriptwriter who has drunk himself from talent to incompetence and determines to drive from Los Angeles to Las Vegas to drink himself to death there.

Another sombre film called *A Simple Plan*, only a B-movie really, gained a place in many people's top ten for its year. It told the story of three men who find a huge amount of money that they decide to keep rather than hand in. The film relates how their lives then disintegrate. The obvious moral of the story was that money can destroy you, but there was an even more frightening moral just below the surface. It was that the lives of the main characters were already empty, but they had been able to hide from the fact, to one degree or another. The money brought the emptiness to the surface, and then left it with nowhere to go. At the end of the film, decades of empty life stretch out ahead of the man who survives, and his wife, and their marriage.

Well, I sort-of like sombre stories. It was a close call whether we went to see *A Simple Plan* or *Shakespeare in Love*. When we eventually saw the latter, it sent us home with a smile on our faces to start rejoicing in the campaign for it to get the Oscars. We did this without quite noticing that reckoning it Oscar-worthy was to recognize that it was a fun, escapist movie, not a deep one, though it did face some of the ambiguity of love and life.

When I read Ruth, I also come home with a smile. I do not do that when I read Saul's story. Yet Saul's story is one I keep coming back to, keep gnawing at, keep trying to understand the dynamics of. I am glad that the Bible has this kind of story as well as Ruth, because life is full of this kind of story, too.

I once watched a long television interview with John Travolta, just after he played a rather despicable lawyer (at least, he starts off so) in *A Civil Action*. He was asked why he had chosen to appear in that film and not two other big recent movies, and he explained how he went about choosing a role. He had to have a sense that there was a character here whom he could get inside. This did not mean it needed to be a person like him - rather the contrary, in a way. He had taken this particular part because the character raised a question and he thought he could get far enough inside the character to answer it, to make the character believable, to make people think 'Ah, now I can imagine how a human being could think and act like that'. It is a version of 'There but for the grace of God go I'. Travolta understands the actor's craft in a way that is similar to my understanding of biblical interpretation. It is to reach an appreciation of this story which makes sense of it, one in which all the parts fit, in which I or someone else can say 'Yes, I can imagine someone relating to God that way'. (I do not mean reducing what happens in the story to our level or eliminating miraculous events because they do not happen to me.)

That is what makes me keep coming back to Saul's story. I want to make sense of it. I am happy (well, sort-of happy) for it to be a sombre story. I want to make sense of it in its sombreness, the way I can make sense of *Leaving Las Vegas* or *A Simple Plan*.

Making Sense of Saul

The question Saul's story raises is much bigger than the ones raised by films like that, not merely because the story is in the Bible but because of the way Saul's story and God's purpose interweave. One aspect of the question thus is, Can I make sense of this man's life? Can I make sense of his character? Can I make sense of his experience? Can I portray his story in such a way as to enable myself and other people to believe that there could have been such a life?

One possible way of approaching those questions is to see Saul as more a victim than an agent. So another aspect of the question is, Can I make sense of this man's God? Who is this God who relates to Saul as this God does? Certainly Saul is a man who is divided and stupid and who makes mistakes. But his story implies that much of that is the result of strange divine influences issuing from strange divine purposes and irrational transfers of affection from one king to another. These then find excuse in mistakes on Saul's part - but they are much smaller mistakes than other people get away with, not least David himself.

Now God is God and in the end we may have to let God be God even when we cannot make sense of what we read and experience. Not 'may have to' but 'must'. That is the burden of God's confrontation of Job and the burden of Paul's argument in Romans 10. But it does not stop God commending Job for telling the truth about God or Paul getting as far as possible in making sense of God, and we will see how far we can get in doing that in respect of God's dealings with

Saul. With human beings, I feel less obligation to surrender before the mystery of the individual personality. There is such a thing as the psychopath and the manic-depressive and the borderline personality, and Saul has been read in that way, but in general the story does not present him as a human being wholly unlike most of the rest of us.

In this connection, another film character he reminds me of is Matthew Poncelot in *Dead Man Walking*, which I mentioned in chapter 2. At the beginning of this (factually-based) story, it is difficult to imagine ever recognizing oneself in the convicted killer of two teenage lovers. Indeed, he seems a psychopath, and a question he raises for the liberal moviegoer is whether we should be executing someone who seems to have something wrong with the chemicals in their brain. By the end of the story, we are able to recognize a human being doing dealings with God and with other people and with himself. Admittedly it is then harder to make sense of the killing he had been involved in, because we have cut off one avenue of 'explanation'. It was not because he was not really a human being in the same sense as we are. Perhaps we then indeed have to surrender before the mystery of human personality after all. And so we will have to do with Saul's. But at least we can try to lift the edges of the garment.

Let us look back over his story. Israel wants a king and Yahweh is both hurt by this and regretful because of knowing it will get them nowhere, but agrees to go along with the desire. Yahweh designates someone who has the looks for the job and something of the background for it, but who does not initially look as if he has the dynamic and may not have the ambition. He is inclined to hide from the responsibility. But God can see such potentials beneath the surface and acts to start bringing them out. When he hears about an attack on some Israelites, he is inspired to take dramatic action to deliver them.

When he sets about the task of getting a grip of the ongoing Philistine problem, he is stood up by Samuel and in Samuel's absence feels bound to act as if he were himself a priest-prophet, as well as king. He then finds himself told that this imperils his position as king. God has a replacement king waiting in the wings. A victory inspired by his son's initiative has the edge taken off it by a well-meant but foolish promise of Saul's. A victory over the Amalekites has the edge taken off it by Saul's failing to fulfil to the letter Samuel's account of Yahweh's instructions about giving everything over to God as a quasi-sacrifice. The two incidents involving Samuel show that kings have to be subordinate to prophets. The way Saul does what he has to do, as he has been bidden, involves one or perhaps two trivial-looking contraventions of that, but because of their symbolic significance they have the kind of far-reaching implications that attached to the mere taking of the fruit of a tree in Eden. Yahweh bids Samuel initiate the process whereby one brown-eyed handsome man is replaced by another.

And Saul can see that this is what is going on. What attracts Yahweh and everyone else to David also attracts Saul. But those very strengths of David are also what make him a threat. The Saul who never wanted to be king now wants that very much indeed, and does not want to surrender it to this long-haired musician with the capacity to win the hearts of his son and his daughter and his whole people and his God. Yes, Saul knows that David is a man of honour and he wants to treat him as such, but he also knows that David is a threat and he wants to treat him as such. Two people struggle for expression inside Saul. Paradoxically, or not, it is only when David feels compelled to leave the panhandle and throw in his lot with the Philistines (27.1-4) that Saul relaxes and becomes his own man and is actually in a position to face his last crisis.

Perhaps Saul had quite a degree of self-understanding. Understanding yourself does not necessarily mean you suddenly start behaving in more sensible ways. Perhaps he also had quite a degree of understanding of Yahweh's ways, except the ones that also puzzle us. Presumably Yahweh by definition has quite

a degree of self-understanding, and also understands Saul. Yet the relationship between these two characters never quite works. Yahweh and Saul have always been at cross-purposes, or at least have never been able to communicate. Samuel and Yahweh could have conversations. Yahweh would speak and Samuel respond, or Samuel speak and Yahweh respond. David, too, would be able to speak with Yahweh and have Yahweh respond, though we are never told of Yahweh speaking directly to David. Yahweh would speak directly to Solomon, taking the initiative or responding to Solomon's prayer. Yahweh never spoke directly to Saul, except to identify Jonathan as the person who had unwittingly broken his promise, only via Samuel.

Yahweh and Saul are a little like a married couple who never quite manage to communicate. When Saul tries to reach out to Yahweh he can never get it right. This is so whether it is an out-of-order sacrifice or a rash promise or a prayer for which he does not feel able to wait for an answer or the forbidden sparing of a king and some animals for the possible glorifying of Yahweh later. Saul worships (15:31), but it not clear what happens to his worship. Because the only way that Yahweh has spoken to him is via Samuel, when Samuel turns his back on him (15:34-35) it is a devastating moment. Is killing Yahweh's priests his way of trying to get his own back on Yahweh? Its effect, however, is to close off another avenue of relating to Yahweh, and (ironically) to surrender it to David along with Abiathar, the one priest who survives. To his credit, Saul has expelled from his kingdom alternative sources of guidance by means of mediums and foretellers. When Samuel himself dies, a bell tolls for the possibility of any communication between Yahweh and Saul (28:3). While David survives his precarious outlaw life through his capacity to consult with Yahweh and get an answer, Saul has no such access to Yahweh.

The most frightening of many frightening observations about Saul in the Old Testament comes not in his story but in David's. There Yahweh promises not to give up on commitment (steadfast love is NRSV's word) to David's successors. I will not do that as I did it to Saul, says Yahweh (2 Samuel 7:15). Reading his story and (say) David's and Solomon's (and that of the subsequent line of kings) makes clear that this is not because Saul deserved to lose Yahweh's commitment in a way they will not. They have strings of reprehensible acts to their name that Saul could hardly rival. 'Saul's downfall is of his own making... The question is not why is Saul rejected... The question is why there is no forgiveness' (Exum and Whedbee, p. 34).

Perhaps we should see Saul as experiencing a similar fate to that of the inhabitants of Canaan when the Israelites arrived. Yahweh declares that they are to be annihilated. According to the story they were degenerate and deserved annihilation. In that sense they could not complain. But it is not obvious that they were more deserving of annihilation than many other nations before or since, including many to which the readers of this book belong. But they were in the wrong place at the wrong time and did not get away with being who they were. So it was with Saul. He had no claim on Yahweh's commitment. But he had as much claim as anyone else. And therefore I grieve for him that he lost it.

It is customary to see Saul as the nearest thing to a tragic figure in the Bible, a man whose downfall reflects not merely his own ill-advised decisions and acts but inexplicable forces that assail him from outside himself. In general the Bible affirms that this is a universe that makes sense, that life makes sense, that God makes sense. But our own experience confirms that this is not always how it looks, and we may be grateful for the presence in scripture of a story that owns that fact.

Saul's Last Battle(s)

So how is Saul to conduct a war? In these stories, several peoples seem to have endless capacity to be routed and destroyed, only then to pop up again full of life. They resemble alien forces you keep thinking you have destroyed, but you never have. Once again the Philistines have gathered their forces for war, at Shunem, in the middle of the wide plain that separates the mountains of Samaria from the mountains of Galilee, and in the middle of an area that theoretically belongs to Israel but that the Philistines dominate. Saul has gathered his forces at Gilboa, at the foot of those mountains of Samaria, on the frontier between the area the Philistines control and the area he controls.

Saul is scared (28:5). He is not sure he can face a battle - presumably because he thinks he is going to lose. He feels like the young man who did not know how to go about finding his father's lost donkeys. He would like to volunteer to join the men who look after the baggage again rather than fight a battle, but that option is not available to the man who let himself be drafted as commander-in-chief of the army. The days when Yahweh inspired him to take decisive action to confront the Ammonites are over. Even Jonathan has apparently lost the edge that generated victories over the Philistines in the old days, slaughter from Michmash to Aijalon. And certainly the days when David's daring generated such victories are over. Indeed, Saul has neglected defending his territory from the Philistines because of his obsession with David. Perhaps he has exhausted his energy in that futile fight.

And he does not know what to do. In that circumstance, you ask God. When David did that, he got an answer. When Saul did that, heaven stayed firmly shut (28:6). Perhaps he suspected that the day had arrived when Yahweh intended to implement the plan to replace him by David, that this would be the last battle he fought. Yahweh did not respond to Saul by means of some dream, the way he would speak to Solomon. He did not respond to Saul by means of the Urim and Tummim, which Saul had unwittingly surrendered to David along with that one priest who survived Saul's massacre. He did not respond to Saul by means of a prophet. The great prophet was dead.

But people do not necessarily become inaccessible when they are dead. You need to keep in mind something of what happens when you die. Your body becomes lifeless and incapable of doing anything. You cannot move or talk or speak or love or worship. But of course you do not cease to exist. And you do not cease to be in people's company. If you are lucky you go to join your family in the family tomb, or if you come from a poorer background you may be in some community burial place. Israelites would regard being buried on your own as weird, but it fits with the rest of our individualism. And because body and spirit are two sides of a coin, what happens to the one mirrors what happens to the other. Our spirits do not cease to exist when we die, but they cannot do anything much without a body. Yet we know that in marginal situations they are semi-independent of our bodies, so that we can dream and daydream and in our dreams be somewhere different from where we are in our bodies, like students in a lecture.

Obviously when people die we have no problem getting in touch with their bodies, with the outer person. The experience is nevertheless an odd one and there is a taboo on it, certainly once they are buried. One would expect that this might imply that we will likewise have no problem in principle getting in touch with the spirits of dead people, with the inner person, because in general what is true of the inner person and what is true of the outer person mirror each other. But again the experience is an odd one, and there is a taboo on it. To put it more theologically, God forbids it. The Bible always implies that it is possible, but always implies that it is forbidden. There is a difference between the realm of death and the realm of life, and we have to accept this until the moment when God brings the dead back to full life in body and spirit.

Saul knows all this, but desperate times call for desperate measures. He is backed into a corner. The wagon trains are in a circle and the Indians have

surrounded them. He has no alternative but now to face the hopelessness of his situation. So that dogged determination of his which refuses to give up is turned in a new direction. He cannot accept the silence of heaven at this point in his life. He has to storm heaven - or disturb Sheol. The one person who has consistently mediated God's word to him is Samuel. He has to speak with Samuel this once more. Ironically, he has himself banished all those people who know how to get in touch with the dead. Even this act of obedience seems to be backfiring on him. But such universal instincts of traditional religion are as impossible to eliminate as the Philistines or the Amalekites. His staff do not have to look far for a medium, only just across the plain at Endor, two or three hours' journey away. We are on the border between territory controlled by Israel and territory controlled by the Philistines, and it may be significant that she lives there. It would be unsafe to function as a medium in indisputably Israelite territory.

Saul's journey may therefore be a dangerous one, taking him behind enemy lines. He changes to put on ordinary garb. His regular clothes would give away who he is, to Philistines or to Israelites. There may be other symbolic significance in stripping off the apparel of royalty and/or of battle. With two of his staff he makes the journey to Endor. It is nightfall by the time they reach the woman's house, and there is a certain symbolic appropriateness about that, too. Darkness is one of the characteristics of death. The grave is a dark place. They have come to have dealings with the realm of darkness. 'It is no accident that just as Saul left his first meeting with Samuel in ch. 9 at the break of day, i.e., the dawn of his career, he both arrives and departs from his last encounter with Samuel while it is still night' (Exum and Whedbee, p. 23).

'I understand you could make contact with someone for me', Saul tells the woman. 'Me?' she replies. 'No, you've got the wrong person. There's no one who can do that any longer. Saul has expelled or killed all the people who could do that [!]. If I went in for that kind of activity, it would be more than my life is worth. Are you some kind of emissary from Saul? Am I being set up? Is this an entrapment in the course of a witchhunt?' Perhaps Saul's disguise has not fooled her. It might be a poor medium who could be so fooled. She wants to discover the reason for the visit before she commits herself.

'I swear in the name of Yahweh that no punishment will come upon you as a result of this', Saul promises. You agree not to recognize me and I will forget this evening ever happened. This is not a set-up and it is not going to lead to your being reported to the authorities. 'OK. Who do you wish to get in contact with?' 'Samuel'.

So Samuel appears. The woman is herself aghast. Somehow this triggers the overt declaration that the person who has come to see her is Saul himself. She has indeed been set up. No, says Saul, she is not to be afraid. His vow holds. He really wants to see Samuel - or rather to talk to Samuel. We are never told that he sees anything, and it seems that the medium is indeed the medium through whom he make his contact with Samuel.

Nevertheless the reason for the woman's terrified reaction is somewhat obscure. Perhaps the ancient reader would be as inclined as the modern reader to think that Saul is himself being taken for a ride by the medium, and that is why we are told of her own terrified reaction to the event. The point is then simply to signal to us that as far as she was concerned, what was happening was real, all right. Saul's contact with Samuel may have been indirect, but it was genuine. Saul has no business trying to get in touch with Samuel, but we have noted more than once what Saul has already discovered, that Yahweh does not have to feel bound by the rules that human beings have to observe. (Admittedly these considerations of the workings within the narrative do not exclude the possibility that its readers are being set up by the narrator. Perhaps he or she did not believe in ghosts, but telling a story about a ghost is the way a theological point can be made.)

When the medium tells Saul what she sees, and he knows that it is indeed Samuel, Saul does obeisance before the invisible presence. He finds that death has not mellowed Samuel. There he was, enjoying a well-earned rest, which Saul has disturbed, and he is not pleased. 'Why have you deceived me?' the medium had asked Saul in her fear for her life. 'Why have you disturbed me?' Samuel asks in his resentment at this interruption of his everlasting afterlife nap. Perhaps he will still be complaining grumpily at resurrection day. Perhaps it was Samuel's evident displeasure that troubled the medium when she saw him, and made her come out with the recognition of Saul that she had been pretending not to have acquired.

'What does Saul want?', Samuel asks. With great pathos, a series of short clauses summarizes the deep hopelessness of Saul's position. The Philistines are attacking him. Yahweh has abandoned him. Yahweh will not respond to him, by prophets or dreams. He does not know what to do, which way to turn.

'Why ask me, then?' retorts the tough prophet. 'Am I likely to have anything to say to you if Yahweh has turned away from you? If Yahweh has become your enemy, am I likely to act as your friend? Anyway you have got what you deserved'. The logic is inexorable and pitiless. Job's comforters would have been a big improvement. There is no answer to the question 'What shall I do, then?' There is no suggestion that repentance is still possible, though that is never a sign that repentance is no longer possible. Jonah offered no hope to the Ninevites, but that did not stop them taking it.

There is an answer to the unasked question, 'What is going to happen, then?' The answer is what Saul feared but had not dared think. Indeed it is worse than he had dared think. Defeat did not have to mean death. It had not done so in previous engagements between Israel and Philistia, whichever side won. Even if it did, his death did not have to mean his sons' death. But it is a fact of life that the sins of fathers are visited on their children, like their blessings, and that is especially so for kings. Their children benefit from their position of privilege, but when defeat and deposition come, their enemies may need to eliminate the line and not just the present occupant of the throne. So that is how it will be. 'Tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me'. Yahweh is going to give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines.

Saul is devastated and collapses. The medium now takes charge of the situation. She is a woman in the line of Hannah and Michal and Abigail.

A student recently completed her coursework for me by painting a picture of the Genesis-Exodus story. In Genesis and Exodus the men are generally at the centre of the narrative, and when women feature in the story, they stand on its margins. Yet the roles they play are so indispensable that without them the narrative could not have unfolded the way it does. So this student painted Genesis and Exodus with women at the centre and men in the margins around them. One could portray 1 and 2 Samuel the same way. Imagine the story without Hannah and Michal and Abigail and the medium at Endor whose name we do not even know.

For the first time in his story someone treats Saul as a human being in need. Perhaps it is a sign that he is doing the turning which Samuel had not asked for and from which he had promised no fruit. Perhaps Samuel knew what he was doing in talking so tough. Making promises to people on condition that they repent encourages them to turn for the wrong reasons and thereby encourages the sort of pseudo-repentance that Saul has manifested more than once. Making no promises suggests that any change that comes is real change. For the first time for years Saul must now not only face reality but also accept it and work with it instead of against it.

Perhaps God knew that it needed someone like Samuel to talk tough but that it also needed someone like this woman to pick Saul off the floor afterwards. Saul needs a Mr Tough and a Ms Gentle as his interrogators. This woman was one who lived outside the margins of society and church, like the kind of women who were attracted to Jesus. She was one who lived under the condemnation of the Torah

as Saul lived under the condemnation of the Prophet. She was one whose very life stood under the sign of death for disobedience (Lev 20:27). She lives in a similar place to the one that Saul occupies. Perhaps she is in a better position than anyone to be able to recognize the truth of the position that Saul is in and to reach out to him with a human generosity of spirit that forgets the tough way he has treated other people like her. The prophet and the medium embody recognition of two aspects of Saul's story, the guilt of the sinful king and the bitter fate of a man trapped in a hopeless situation (Simon).

'I listened to you and did what you said when you came here, despite the fact that I was risking my life', says the medium. 'Now listen to me. You need something to eat. You have a journey ahead of you'. It is true literally, but metaphorically, too. Saul has not eaten all day. He could not face food when he was sick with the thought of what the next day might bring. Now he knows what the next day will bring. Facing facts does not change them, but it changes his relationship with them. Being willing to eat is a sign that you have looked the future in the eye and are going to face it, that you are going to make your journey.

'No, I can't eat', says Saul. I cannot face the journey. But the woman and Saul's officers prevail over him and he gets up off the ground and sits on the edge of the bed. The woman kills a calf kept for a feast and roasts meat and bakes bread. This seems bizarre, but it repeats the actions of Abraham - or rather the actions of Sarah and Abraham's servant - in caring for the three heavenly visitors in Genesis 18. And they all eat, and the event also repeats the meal that set Saul on the path of kingship, so that these two meals frame that kingship. The chapter has had him paralyzed by fear of the Philistines and by fear of Samuel, but it seems that in some sense he has come out the other side of fear and can set off to face his future.

The story then holds us in suspense for a chapter or two while indulging in a flashback. It brings us up to date on how the Philistines had got where they were and how David had had a narrow escape from either having to fight with them against Israel or being exposed for what he was. And then it tells us nothing about the battle that took place hours after Saul's arrival back at the foot of the mountains of Gilboa except that the Philistines put the Israelites to flight. The Israelite fighters were killed as they vainly fled back into the mountains for safety.

The Philistines of course made the king and his sons a special target. His sons Abinadab and Malchishua - and Jonathan - were located and killed. Saul was located too, and shot and wounded. He knew that one way or another he was finished. He bade his armour-bearer finish him off rather than give the Philistines the pleasure of doing so, but his armour-bearer felt the same way as David had when he had had the opportunity to lay hand on Saul, and could not do it. So Saul took his own sword and fell on it. Better to determine your own fate than leave it to the Philistines. Samuel has gone back to his rest, and neither God nor narrator tells us whether this was as fine a way to end as could be found, or whether it was a final act of decisive wrongdoing.

When the Philistines found his body next day, they cut off his head and stripped off his armour, as David once had Goliath. The action shows the shame that victors delight in showing to the defeated, and suggests a kind of justification for Saul's determination that they would only be able to do that to him when he was dead. They put his armour in the temple of Astarte and they fastened his body to the walls of the great nearby Philistine city of Beth Shean. To this day the hill on which the successive ancient cities of Beth Shean were built towers over the western part of the great plain and over the magnificent Roman city at its foot and the modern town that sprawls out to the south. And on top of the hill, standing stark against the sky as you look up from the Roman city, is a gnarled dead tree which for me is always the tree on which Saul's dead body was hanged.

It was a terrible thing to do. Given that fact that the body still stands for the person, the least you can do to someone you have killed is let them rest. Saul's spirit cannot rest if his body stands hanging on the walls of Beth-Shean. If there is a value-judgment here in the story, it is not that Saul's suicide was a terrible act, but that the Philistines' subsequent treatment of Saul was a terrible act.

News of his fate will have spread like wildfire through the whole of Israel, but in particular it reached the people of Jabesh Gilead. They owed their pride and their right eyes to Saul's first and greatest act as king, and they had not forgotten. Perhaps their remembering illustrates the attitude the people as a whole would show to Saul. For all their admiration for David, they never attempted to depose Saul. If his personal unhappiness and his obsession with David made the headlines in the Israelite tabloids, it did not detract from the people's appreciation of him for what he had done for them in keeping the Philistines at bay through his reign. A company of the bravest men in Jabesh Gilead set off and marched all night to Beth Shean and took down the bodies of Saul and his sons and carried them home to Jabesh and burned them and buried the bones under a tamarisk tree and mourned them.

You could say that Saul lived an undistinguished early life, then had his one moment of glory, and then fell into a morass from which he never found the exit, unless you could say he found it in his last 24 hours. This was without much conscious help from Samuel (unless he was playing a very canny game) but with significant help from a woman who was herself lucky to be alive. She somehow managed to help him gird up his loins and face his future and his end in the way he had been refusing to do for a long time, and play the man. And he was thus able to determine his end rather than have it determined for him, and to reap a kind of reward for that one moment of glory, and rest in peace with his sons in a place that mattered to him.

12

The Men Who Didn't Mind a Fight (1 Samuel 4-2 Samuel 4)

One of the interesting differences between British and American Christianity is that there is a much stronger strand of pacifist conviction in the USA than in Britain - at least among the theologians and students among whom I move. Perhaps it is because the USA owes its existence to wars more recently than other North Atlantic powers. Perhaps the American liberal conscience has a hard time over what the immigrants whose descendants now control the country did to native Americans only a century or so ago. Perhaps it is because of Viet Nam. Perhaps it is because the USA still fights more wars than anyone else does.

Pacifism is not merely a possibility that a private individual might consider, like vegetarianism. There are "peace churches". Actually, it may be that there are vegetarian churches and I have simply not yet come across them. If not, if vegetarianism ever gets the hold in the USA that it has in Britain, in due course there will be vegetarian churches, and California is where the denomination will begin. In Britain I never came across a Mennonite church. In Southern California there is the equivalent of a diocese, or at least a deanery. Such pacifist "Radical Reformation" Christianity is one of the serious options (denominations are a supermarket) alongside Roman Catholic and Pentecostal and Orthodox and Protestant.

War in the Old Testament

The Old Testament and pacifism make uneasy bedfellows - like the Old Testament and vegetarianism or feminism or evangelicalism or catholicism or any other -ism (even Judaism!), now I come to think of it. In each case there are strands of the Old Testament that resonate with the -ism, but there is much else that is an embarrassment. Admittedly things are perhaps not so very different with the New Testament and pacifism. There God does achieve things through accepting crucifixion, but God combines that with announcing the intention to spill much blood in the course of judging the world.

What is war and what bothers us about it? War involves solving group conflicts, especially regarding sovereignty over peoples and land, by violence rather than (e.g.) by argument before peers in a context of law. It usually involves killing people, and it is this in particular that bothers people in the modern age. We do not like the idea of killing people any more than we like the idea of God sending people to Hell.

In the Old Testament and in our own world war is not one thing. There is liberative war, war designed to free other people, like Abraham's rescue of Lot (Genesis 14) or the British and American intervention in Kosovo. There is punitive war, war designed to effect retribution on people who have done wrong, like the British and American intervention in Iraq or Saul's attack on Amalek. There is defensive war, war in response to threatening attack, like the American response to Pearl Harbour or Israel's original war with Amalek (Exodus 17). There is aggressive war designed to gain territory, like that of immigrant Americans on native Americans or Israelites on Canaanites (though both these are also seen as retribution on people who have done wrong). There is also war-avoidance like that of European powers in the 1930s or the USA before Pearl Harbour, when Israel confronts Edom's hostility (Numbers 20:14-21). And there is what you might call spectator war, when God's people concentrates on watching God look after the violence and does little itself (e.g. Exodus 14; Number 13-14; Joshua 6; Revelation).

Genesis assumes that the world was not war-like when it was created. This is not the truism it might be on our lips, because Genesis tells its creation story in such a way as to confront the creation stories of the culture around. In Babylon, creation issued from war in heaven. War was written into the fabric of life, not just among human beings but among the gods. Of course the New Testament talks about 'war in heaven' and thus sees war as more deeply part of the fabric of reality than the Old Testament generally does (though passages such as Exodus 17 imply that). But even in the New Testament, war is not traced back into the Godhead itself.

By implication the violence that emerges in Genesis 4 in the actions and words of Cain and Lamech is one of the ways in which human beings spoiled God's world. Genesis 4 is part of the portrayal of the gradual fall of the world that runs through Genesis 1-11 as a whole. This process of decline continues with the emergence of the 'Nephilim', who were renowned warriors (6:1-4). They came into being through some wrong-headed boundary-crossing activity on the part of heavenly beings. The latter's problem was sex not violence, but it accelerated the process of decline whereby the earth came to be filled with violence, and it is this that leads to God's decision to kill all the world's people (6:5-13). But that leads nowhere, because violence is the fruit of a fatal flaw in the very makeup of humanity (8:21). In a development parallel to that in Genesis 4, there is soon arising a warrior like Nimrod, an impressive warrior even by Yahweh's standards (10:9).

When Yahweh sets about a plan to restore the flawed world by making promises to Abraham, in general the early stages of this plan exclude war-making. This is possible because Israel's ancestors in Genesis are a pastoral people who live outside the power structures of their day. Things will be very different in Egypt when they become something more like a nation and when they have to relate

to nations like Egypt itself, and there war-making follows. Indeed it is already a feature in one of the opening stories about Abraham. Matter-of-factly Genesis 14 tells us how a conflict arises among a number of middle-eastern kings. Lot gets caught in the crossfire and is taken as a prisoner-of-war. Abraham hears of it and sets off with a posse to rescue him. What else was he supposed to do? He routs the army of the victorious kings, pursues them to the north of Damascus, and recaptures their captives. 'God Most High has delivered your enemies into your power' is the king of Salem's later theological reflection. It is where God learns how to make war.

God does not forget this lesson, but Abraham is able to forget it, because his vocation does not require it again. Unlike God, in general Abraham is something of a wimp, not inclined to stand up to anyone. For the sake of a quiet life he will defer to anyone - God, Pharaoh, Lot, Sarah.... I am not sure this makes him a preferable male model, but certainly he stands in contrast with the stereotypical male model of aggressiveness and decisiveness and violence that runs through 1 Samuel. It is embodied in different ways in Saul, Jonathan, and David, and is by implication enjoyed and affirmed by the Israelite readers of this book. It has also had more prominence in Sunday School. On the other hand, in the Bible itself the Abraham story comes first, and in adult church it has had higher status. Perhaps this explains why Christian men also tend to be wimps, though it does not answer the question whether it is wimps who come to faith in Abraham's God or whether it is coming to that faith that turns us into wimps.

The story that begins in Genesis thus seems to imply the obvious assumption that war is a non-ideal thing but that East of Eden it is a fact. God and people therefore have to shrug their shoulders and gird up their loins and get on with it when necessary. What God then does is make a virtue out of a necessity and use warfare in various ways. It can be a way of exposing lies. Pharaoh claims ultimate significance for his own rule and that of his gods, so Yahweh makes war on him and shows that his claim is false. It can be a way of putting in their place people who oppose Yahweh. It can be a way of removing people who have become so offensive that Yahweh no longer wishes to tolerate their existence. It can be a way of making room for other people whose cause Yahweh wishes to prosper. It can be a way of people defending themselves rather than letting themselves be killed.

What the Old Testament story as a whole goes on to imply is that war is inevitable but pointless. It persists but it gets no one anywhere.

Warmaking in the Stories of Samuel, Saul, and David

Such assumptions underlie the stories in 1 and 2 Samuel. Warfare runs through this narrative as a whole. Its reality is a key reason for the people's wish to have a king (1 Samuel 8:20). The dominant external feature of Saul's story is then the conflict between Israel and Philistia. Indeed, Saul and David both build a career on fighting Philistines (Brueggemann). Saul battles against them nobly, decisively, successfully, and intelligently, but in due course meets his death in battle with them. These are not aggressive wars like those in Joshua. Israel is not an army invading the land from outside. Most of them are conflicts between two peoples who want to control the same land, in which both are actually outsiders. They are the kind of conflicts that over history have regularly arisen between peoples.

The first two battles between Philistia and Israel (1 Samuel 4 and 7) come to two very different conclusions. The first time, the Philistines simply attack the Israelites, apparently as part of their campaign to gain control of the country, and they win a major victory. The second time, they receive intelligence that Israel has mustered at Mizpah and they assume that this is the

preliminary to an attack on them. This is half-true, even though the immediate intention was a prayer meeting. The Philistines therefore get in their retaliation first, but find that on this occasion the technique fails.

On the first occasion, the Israelites assumed that the key factor in the result was the nature of Yahweh's involvement. Defeat did not mean that Yahweh had been inactive. 'Yahweh has routed us' (4:3), they comment. They do ask 'Why?' but they do not wait for an answer. On the second occasion the narrator personally affirms that the key factor was indeed Yahweh's involvement, though an involvement of a different kind. That reflects a change in the situation. Israel has returned to Yahweh, and Samuel promises that Yahweh will therefore deliver them from Philistine domination. When they hear that the Philistine army is on the way, they plead with Samuel to plead with Yahweh to do that. The attack comes at the very moment when Samuel is offering a sacrifice, an enacted prayer for them, and 'Yahweh thundered with a loud noise that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel' (7:10).

It seems likely that an impartial military analyst would have reckoned that the earlier result, the Philistine victory, was exactly what one would have expected. The Philistines had the better hardware and were the more efficient military machine, and this analyst would reckon that explanations in terms of Yahweh routing Israel were redundant. Militarily nothing has changed on the second occasion. The Philistines' defeat is therefore extraordinary. And the narrator's comment is thus not that Israel routed them. It is again that Yahweh did. Israel simply watched, and then undertook a mopping-up operation.

Saul's own first major military action involves people who are pressing Israel on the other side, on the east. The Ammonites, we noted, have attacked Jabesh Gilead, and forced it to accept Ammonite authority. That in itself might have been accepted, or at least tolerated. But as part of the terms for an ongoing settled relationship between these two peoples in which Jabesh Gilead recognizes Ammonite sovereignty, the Ammonite leader requires that everybody's eye be gouged out as a sign of the city's humiliation. Yahweh's spirit comes on Saul when he hears this and he leads the Israelites in slaughtering the Ammonites. The battle, in other words, looks an ordinary battle, but the fact that the Israelites undertook it had a supernatural explanation.

David later fights a similar battle on behalf of the people of a Judean town called Keilah (23:1-5). The Philistines have been attacking them and stealing their corn. We are used to burglars stealing our stereos and our televisions, but that is not a matter of life and death. The Philistines are stealing the food upon which the people depend for life. David wants to do what Saul did. Saul had acted instinctively and it had been OK. David consults Yahweh (presumably by means of Urim and Tummim). Yahweh says 'Yes'. David's men are not so keen about intervening in a situation that is nothing to do with them. They are under enough pressure already. David diplomatically agrees to check whether Yahweh had taken this into account, and again Yahweh says 'Yes'. They win a great victory.

Israel's defeat of the Philistines in chapter 7 had been a triumph, but of course not the end of a war. Indeed, 'there was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul' (14:52). The Philistines regroup. Saul's own first victory then comes about through an act of bravado on his son's part. It is undertaken in the conviction that it is Yahweh who does the delivering of people and that such mad acts are therefore as likely to be the acts God uses as the mustering of a huge army.

He is proved right. The act of bravado leads to a major breakthrough, but that comes about through the Philistine army being thrown into an irrational panic that itself looks God-inspired. The quaking of the earth that follows and encourages the panic makes that even clearer. The victory would not have come about without Jonathan's act of bravado expressive of his trust in God, but it

would not have come about (at least in the way it did) without Yahweh's intervening to turn the winning of a point into the winning of a game. All this leads to the conclusion that 'Yahweh delivered Israel that day' (14:23). The only thing Israel has to do is slaughter the demoralized army and take the booty, which Jonathan and Saul are prepared to do with great enthusiasm (14:30, 36). They are held back not by Yahweh's viewing this as distasteful but by the whole other problem of Saul's promise that Jonathan has accidentally broken, which regrettably makes the day end less bloodily than they would both have hoped.

There is a comparison and a contrast with the story of David and Nabal. When Nabal declines to pay protection money, David blows his top and resolves to kill Nabal and his entire staff (25:22). This is indeed the David who began his career killing Goliath and won his wife killing a hundred or two of Goliath's countrymen. But the reaction makes his refusal to lay hands on Saul all the more remarkable. Indeed, we are not given the impression that he was ever tempted to lay hands on Saul. Fortunately for all concerned, in Nabal's case the wise Abigail arrives and urges restraint on David, who realizes that she has saved him from getting blood on his hands in assuming that he needs to defend his own honour in that way (25:33).

The story of Saul's first victory over the Philistines (ch. 14) was prefaced by the account of the crisis when Samuel stands Saul up and Saul offers the enacted prayers when he should not have done so (ch. 13). One point about that story is to affirm that whatever happens, Saul is subordinate to Samuel. This is not a personal thing. What it means is that monarchy is subordinate to prophecy, that state is subordinate to church. There is a certain paradox here. From the people's viewpoint, a main objective of Saul's appointment is to get the Philistines off their back. But Saul is to be constrained in achieving this. He cannot make war in the way that military considerations suggest. He always has to be looking over his shoulder for Samuel. And one of the prophet's tasks is to make sure that the odds are always stacked against Israel, in order to demonstrate that the story unfolds because of Yahweh's will and the exercise of Yahweh's power rather than because of Saul's. On the other hand, there are many other occasions when victory comes about simply because Israel fights better (e.g. 19:8). When he fought Goliath, David had no need of armoury, but in due course he feels the need of Goliath's sword (21:9).

All this shows that war is indeed taken for granted as a feature of the way things are in the world, and a feature of the way Yahweh is therefore involved in the world. It is a feature of the way men are in the world, and a feature of men that God uses. David was a man who began his life as a shepherd living by violence. Sheep may be lovable and cuddly but they cannot afford their shepherds to be like that. Actually sheep are less lovable and cuddly in reality than they are in Christian fantasy. When the Search Committee first considered David for a place at court, one of the people who advocated that he should be brought for interview argued for this on the basis of characterizing him as a warrior, a man of war, a war-like man (16:18). He initially came to more public attention and began to carve out a position as heir apparent by killing someone. He won his wife and thus strengthened that position by killing two hundred people - or was it just one hundred, and does it make a difference, unless you are one of the second hundred? If that is the bride price, what kind of man does not respond 'Oh, OK then, let's just be friends?' And unless you are a psychopath already, how can you stay the same man that you were after the experience of all that killing for the sake of gaining a status symbol?

The story is one illustration of the way war can be a context for other forms of human wrongdoing. Saul, after all, has just now outwardly expressed the hope that David may fight Yahweh's battles bravely, but has inwardly expressed the hope that he may die in the attempt. It is the same desire that soon afterwards finds expression in his asking for the death of those hundred Philistines as

Michal's dowry (18:17, 25). On another occasion a Philistine invasion is a means of David's escaping Saul's posse. Saul has to go back to deal with the Philistines (23:27-28), as later the Assyrians will have to give up besieging Jerusalem to deal with trouble elsewhere (2 Kings 19).

The anticipation of Yahweh's dealings with a gentile warmaker is noteworthy. But the narrative does not imply that warmaking as such is wrong or pagan in the way that it implies that monarchy, for instance, is wrong and pagan, even though the broader context of the Old Testament does imply that neither goes back to creation. The narrative takes for granted the way things are. It accepts the facts of life. Philistine ambitions are real. Israel can lie there and be trampled on, or it can take responsibility for its destiny. We might formulate the logic of the matter in such terms, but the Old Testament never does. It presupposes it. The question is not whether to make war, but when and why and how.

And how can David not be taken further along a road of crippling inner disablement when he is driven to survive Saul's turning on him by ongoing violence? After Saul's first victories over the Philistines, Samuel had told him that Yahweh was commissioning him to slaughter the entire population of the Amalekites because of the way they attacked Israel on the way from Egypt (15:1-3). We have noted that the Philistines keep popping up again after being comprehensively slaughtered, and equally oddly the slaughter of the Amalekites does not stop them being available to be attacked by David later. That is what happens when he is driven into an ongoing life of violence by the need to escape from Saul. So he also kills all the Amalekites, along with the Geshurites and Girzites (27:8-9). We know nothing about the Geshurites or Girzites but we know that the Amalekites are fair game because Yahweh had declared that they should be eliminated, like Babylon/Rome in the New Testament. The story implies that David was not acting dishonourably in killing all the people there, and thereby perhaps implies that the other two tribes belong in the same bracket as the Amalekites. But these wars are not described as ones that Yahweh inspires or fights or approves.

While Saul had got into trouble for preserving some of the Amalekites' cattle for sacrifice later, David gets away with taking their cattle and clothing as booty. The advantage of killing all the people, David knows, is that no one survives to tell the tale and inform the Philistines that he has been attacking them and not attacking Judah, as he claimed. But it is unlikely that the narrator, or even David, would be quite cynical enough to make that in itself enough reason to kill them. David is capable of killing and capable of keeping alive, but he always has a reason of principle, even if it sometimes seems to work against his immediate interests. He could surely have got one of his men to kill Saul, just as he got one to kill the man who claimed to have killed Saul, and thereby kept his hands clean.

But then, establishing the principle that the king's life is sacred will serve David well in due course. Perhaps it will serve Judah as a whole well in due course. After the split between Judah and the rest of the clans, Judah experienced four hundred years of political stability. The northern kingdom's three hundred years of life before it was conquered by Assyria is the story of a sequence of violent coups d'etat in which one king whom someone did not like is summarily executed in favour of another who will soon go the same way. It is not clear that this does anyone any good, even apart from the kings who get executed. But we have noted that there is no end to the strange human hope that changing the government will improve things for a nation.

In the secular thinking of the modern Western world we talk in terms of human life being inherently sacred. The Bible does not think in these terms. It does think in terms of men and women being made in God's image. What is wrong about attacking a human being is therefore that it involves an attack on God. It is like defacing a portrait of the Queen or King. There is a sense in which all of

life is sacred because all of life comes from God, animal life as much as human life, so that killing an animal is something people do not undertake casually. It is an act they undertake before God. The life of Yahweh's anointed is especially sacred because Yahweh has laid hands on him and become identified with him. He represents God in a special way. Talking about human beings as made in God's image is an extension of that to all of us - or implicitly confining it to kings is another thing that is wrong with monarchy. Saul therefore cannot be touched. There is another sense in which God has claimed the life of the Amalekites (after all, the King or Queen has rights over what to do with his or her image), so that it has become sacred and must be given over to God as a quasi-sacrifice.

With that extraordinary ability to rise from the dead, the Amalekites are alive and well once again a few chapters later, raiding David's own base in his absence and with curious, un-David-like restraint taking the human beings captive rather than killing them (30:1-3). David pursues them, rescues his womenfolk and children, and kills all the Amalekites again, except for 400 who escape. Killing everybody in a town in order to leave no-one to tell the tale *was his practice all the time he lived in the country of the Philistines* (27:11). How many human beings are we talking about?

When his position is established, David naturally gives priority to sorting out the Philistines once and for all (2 Samuel 8:1). Should we be more surprised that he goes on to sort out the Moabites, the King of Zobah, the Aramaeans of Damascus, and the Edomites? Some of these might be portrayed as wise moves to protect the kingdom from hostile neighbours, but they also have a suggestion of aggressive wars to build an empire. And Yahweh is involved in them. Yahweh gives David victory wherever he goes (8:14).

Actually David Clines tells us how many people we are talking about. He estimates that David's body count in 1 and 2 Samuel is 'something like 140,000 men, in addition to the 15 individuals whose deaths he is said to have been personally responsible for' (*Interested Parties*, p. 217). Who was this man before, and who is he afterwards?

It might seem surprising that Jesus did not include in the Sermon on the Mount the comment 'It was said of old, "You shall only make war when God tells you to do so", but I say to you, "You shall not make war at all"'. There might be several reasons for this omission. One is that the Sermon on the Mount, like the New Testament in general, is directly concerned with one-to-one human relationships not national affairs. Another is that no one would have taken any notice. On a naive day I am inclined to think that a few more straight statements like that about a few issues that have become contentious in the Christian Church would have saved a lot of controversy. Most days I know that there are many issues on which God has spoken quite clearly and this does not mean that the people of God take a blind bit of notice. We know how to evade the thrust of what God says without acknowledging we are doing so. So God does not achieve a great deal by talking straight. The parables suggest that that Jesus wondered if he might achieve more by talking slant and leaving people to work things out for themselves, but the results look no better.

Yet another reason for omitting that comment from the Sermon on the Mount is perhaps that God recognizes that war continues to be an inevitable if stupid reality in the world. I would not be surprised if at some point since, Jesus has thought to himself, 'I have shown them the way I achieved their deliverance from evil, by accepting violence rather than by showing it. If some of them infer that this is the way to set about resolving human conflicts, too, that it fine by me. It will be interesting to see if it works'. For some people to infer this constitutes an important response to the fact that war is as stupid and futile and degrading as it is inevitable.

The Fighting Within the People of God

'Naked displays of power and force dominate the final chapters of 1 Samuel' (Miscall, p. 128). There is much less reference to prophets and to the word of Yahweh. Relationships are increasingly exploitative, violent, and deadly. The conflict between Saul and David means that such bloody conflict is a reality within the people of God and not only over against other peoples. This becomes more so after Saul's death as Saul's party and David's party fight for the succession.

At some stage it looks likely that one of the purposes of telling the story of how David came to be king was to whitewash him - to demonstrate that he reached this position by entirely honourable means. If we were feeling cynical we might be inclined to assume that there are skeletons in the cupboard here. In this connection there are plenty of Old Testament scholars prepared to play a combination of Bob Woodward and Ken Starr (key figures in the story of Richard Nixon's resignation and Bill Clinton's impeachment). For myself, I am prepared to assume that the authors are writing under oath and would not risk perjury. They may be economical with the truth but I cannot imagine that they simply manufactured the picture of David's unwillingness to kill Saul, even if they did put a pious spin on the fact.

The account of David's response to Saul's actual death illustrates all this (see 2 Samuel 1). On the third day after the battle in the north in which Saul and Jonathan were killed, a man arrives at David's base at Ziklag in Philistine-controlled southern Judah to bring the news. It is an extraordinary feat that he should have travelled that far in two days. His clothes are torn and his head is grimy. To have taken part in a battle and/or to have run that far in two days might have been enough to achieve that. But these are signs that you have been too preoccupied with something else to care about your personal appearance. They are also the sign of mourning. The man tells David that the army fled from the battle and that many died and that Saul and Jonathan were among them. He speaks of how he happened to be on Mount Gilboa, and found himself near Saul who was leaning on his spear (exhausted? impaled?) as the Philistine forces pressed upon his position. Saul asked him who he was, and he said he was an Amalekite. Saul told him he was wounded and finished, and begged him to complete the job before the Philistines got him.

There are several ironies here. We have noted that Saul, Samuel, and David had a go at killing all the Amalekites more than once, and Saul once got into deep trouble for not killing one of them, and here is Saul asking one to kill him. The young man will later tell David that though he is ethnically an Amalekite, he is the son of a resident alien in Israel. Like other passages in the Old Testament, this shows that the impression we get from some passages about the invariable exclusion of foreigners from Israel is an oversimplification. Foreigners could always apply for a resident's visa, and eventually for citizenship, though they would only get one if they had joined the Church of England. But no doubt in time of war a certain ambivalence was felt towards them, like that which led to the USA's internment of Japanese Americans in the Second World War.

We know, as David did not, that the Amalekite's story is at least a partial fabrication. We know how Saul died. We were told in the previous chapter, 1 Samuel 31 (the division between these books is later than the books themselves - the books tell a continuous story). Saul did ask someone to help him finish himself off, but that was his armour-bearer, and he was terrified to do so, so Saul and the armour-bearer both committed suicide. Perhaps this Amalekite had been near enough to see this drama unfolding. But this presupposes he was an Amalekite (though that would be an odd thing to invent), and that he was the son of a resident alien. It would be easy enough to claim this but to say you had lost your passport in the battle.

At least part of the story is invented, and the reason for inventing it becomes clear. The young man goes on to present David with Saul's crown and the band off his arm. They are the evidence that at least something in his story is true. Saul is indeed dead. They are designed to signal to David that the crown now belongs to him. The Amalekite is almost behaving like a prophet. And they are designed to elicit acceptance from David, like that given to Hittites such as Ahimelech (a different Ahimelech from the luckless priest of that name) and Uriah who found a place in David's army. Perhaps the Amalekite had received this acceptance from Saul. Now that Saul is dead, he does not wish to join all the other Amalekites, dead. Unfortunately this plan backfires. The Amalekite presumably expected David to be glad that Saul was dead, but finds David collapsing into grief for Saul and Jonathan (whom the Amalekite did not mention).

David's staff soon catch on to the fact that this is the appropriate reaction, and do the same. That evening David again asks the man where he came from. It is at this point that he reveals that he is a resident alien, which is perhaps intended to make sure that he finds acceptance with David. Again he has miscalculated. One wonders whether David himself had been doing some calculating during the space provided by the mourning. He has to work out what to do now. He will have thought previously in general terms about what he should do when Saul died, but he needs now to react to a specific set of circumstances. He must tread carefully. He wants to be king, and is entitled to a sigh of relief that the man who wanted to kill him is now dead, but he does not want to look as if he is pleased. He certainly does not want to reward a regicide. That may backfire on him. It is in his interests to build up conviction that the king's person is sacred. He also does not want his having acquired Saul's crown to make people think he killed Saul, for instance because he was actually fighting on the Philistine side.

The Amalekite has miscalculated in revealing (or claiming) to be a resident alien. It means he should have known better than to lay hands on Yahweh's anointed king, the act that David had always avoided. He should have shared in the terror of the king's armour-bearer at such an act. David bids one of his staff lynch the man for his act. We have seen that David gets away with lying; he has a charmed life. Not everyone does. David built his reputation on violence and ensured his survival through violence, but now he desists and gets someone else to do his lynching work. The time has come to keep his hands clean.

That is partly because the death of the king means that the time has also come to make a move on the throne. First he moves his base out of panhandle territory in Ziklag to the biggest city in Judah, Hebron. There the people of Judah indeed anoint David king over Judah (2:4). It is a defining moment, and not just in the immediately obvious sense. Whose business is it to anoint people? It is Yahweh's. Yahweh does it via a person such as a prophet. Previously the verb 'anoint' has thus always had a singular subject. The exception that proves the rule is the trees' anointing of the bramble (Judges 9:15). Instead of being a sign of supernatural designation and equipping, anointing is now an expression of the will of the people. Yahweh does not give up anointing, but in future competes with the people for the privilege.

As well as seeing that Saul's self-confessed killer gets killed rather than rewarded, David lets it be known how much he admires the way the people of Jabesh Gilead saw to it that Saul got a decent burial. He also adds to his message to them 'Oh, by the way, I'm king now, in Judah anyway.' The qualification is an important one. From the perspective of history it is inevitable that David becomes king over all Israel, but not everyone (even David) viewed it as inevitable at the time. In the north there were people to whom it seemed much more obvious that a descendant of Saul should be king. The people of Jabesh Gilead owed much to Saul, whose first decisive action had been

delivering them from the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11). They might be just the kind of people who would take that view. David invites them to see that actually the commitment to Saul that he shared with them, and the commitment to Yahweh that they share with him now, point to their recognizing David (2 Samuel 2:4b-7).

But in any case, everybody knows that monarchy is supposed to work by a son succeeding his father, partly to stop people fighting over the succession every time. And the people who saw it that way knew that they could then pull the strings of a Saulide puppet.

So the commander of Saul's army, Abner, proclaims Saul's surviving son Ishbaal king over the northern part of Israel, though he locates their base in the safety of the area the other side of the Jordan, at Mahanaim. The NIV follows the Hebrew text and gives Ishbaal's name as Ishbosheth, which means 'Shameful Man', and it is easy to see why the story changes his name to that. Like his the name of his nephew Meribaal/Mephibosheth, his real name, Ishbaal, includes the word *ba'al*. That does not mean that his parents worshipped Baal as opposed to Yahweh - the story has given no hint of that, and it surely would have done if it were true. The Hebrew word *ba'al* is simply a word that means 'Lord', and it looks as if in this period you could apply that word to Yahweh. In a later period you could not, and the name sounded shameful - so the Hebrew text changed it to 'Shameful Man'.

For over seven years Israel as a whole now has two kings, one ruling the north, the other ruling the south. The fragile unity of the Israelite state will perhaps never be properly restored. Certainly it will take little to make it fly apart on the death of David's own successor.

On one occasion the staffs of the two kings hold a perhaps-secret meeting at Gibeon, on the border between the areas they respectively controlled. They fall into a trial of strength reminiscent of the story of David and Goliath. Perhaps they had met to do battle, or perhaps this context was not meant to involve bloodshed, but it ends in fighting and death, with members of the people of God killing each other. 'Is the sword to keep devouring forever?' asks Abner of the leader of David's side, David's nephew Joab. 'Do you not know that the end will be bitter?' The middle has not been too sweet, one is tempted to respond. Abner has himself been driven into killing one of his pursuers, Joab's brother. 'How long will it be before you order your people to turn from the pursuit of their kinsmen?' If there is some ambivalence in David's mind about killing, there is evidently some in the mind of people on Saul's side, too. You can be a person like Abner asking the question 'How did we get into this mess?' yet be unable to get out of it. 'There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David,' the narrator comments. The cycle of violence takes a lot of straightening.

But 'David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.' Abner in due course recognizes this, to judge from the fact that eventually he makes secret overtures to David. It seems that the northern Israelite leadership has lost heart for the attempt to prop up a Saulide monarchy, and Abner sends a message announcing that he is ready to negotiate with David.

Joab and David's forces are away on a raid when these negotiations take place, and Joab in particular is in no mood for concessions at the moment of victory. That always takes courage, but David will later find it useful that Joab is a ruthless soldier. Concessions are not his style. The situation is complicated by the fact that Abner was the man who killed Joab's brother. He might also be a potential rival for Joab among David's staff (Brueggemann). Joab sends for Abner and takes him on one side as if to talk, and stabs him. David can afford the luxury of being extremely annoyed with Joab and extremely grieved at the death of someone who has been a thorn in his side.

The killing of Ishbaal follows the killing of Abner. Ishbaal was only Abner's puppet, but he was Saul's son, and therefore he constituted a temptation

to anyone who wanted to make David's position more secure and thereby demonstrate their loyalty to David. So two brothers called Rechab and Baanah on Ishbaal's staff killed their master. In their miscalculation of David's reaction they recall the Amalekite. They brought Ishbaal's head to David, but it cost them their own. As David lamented for Saul and Jonathan and punished the Amalekite, and grieved for Abner, he punishes Ishbaal's killers. He is directly untainted by murder. It will not stay that way forever.

After Joab's murder of Abner, David commented 'Today I am powerless, even though anointed king. These men, the sons of Zeruiah [Joab and his other surviving brother], are too violent for me' (3:39). It seems to be said with a straight face, but it is hard to read with a straight face. David is as caught as Saul was. David has won his way to the throne with the aid of violence, in relation to fellow-Israelites as well as other peoples, even if he has been scrupulous in his relationship with Saul in person. Violence is not something that can be contained and confined to a particular segment of human relationships. People who assume that it is a fair way of deciding questions in one area, or at least who prove that it is an apparently effective way of deciding questions in one area, are likely to find themselves the victims of it in another.

When Deuteronomy sets up the standards for life in the promised land, one aspect of its vision is that the people of God is a family in which people are each other's brothers and sisters. This is Deuteronomy's distinctive basis for an appeal for what we might call civilized or generous life in the people of God. Surely you will want to be considerate rather than oppressive, liberating rather than enslaving, it says, because the people you are relating to are family. A converse logic is at work in Israel's actual history. If violence works outside the family, it will work inside.

That Babylonian creation story sees the creation of humanity as resulting from fighting among the gods. Indeed, it is the body of a god who dies in the conflict that is recycled in order to provide the raw material with which to make humanity. It is not surprising if the creatures of such origin are so deeply flawed and inclined to violence. The view of human nature is more profoundly gloomy than the one in Genesis. There at least humanity is created good, in the image of a different kind of God, even if it soon becomes deeply flawed. There is a potential to be renewed.

If the body of the state of Israel and the monarchy of David has its birth in an endless cycle of violence, is it possible that David himself or his state can ever escape its legacy in their own being?

13

The Man Whose Day Got Spoiled (2 Samuel 5-6)

So all the obstacles and threats are removed, though David will soon create some threats of his own, and David can become king of Israel as a whole. The rest of the clans thus come to his base at Hebron. The story refers to these as the clans of 'Israel', by which it means northern Israel. In terms of geographical size or number of clans, the north was much bigger than the south, and the word 'Israel' can thus get applied to the north over against the word 'Judah' applied to the south. Henceforth in the Old Testament the use of the word 'Israel' can thus be confusing. As Judah was the dominant clan in the south, Ephraim was dominant in the north, and some of the prophets later refer to the northern clans as 'Ephraim'. To try to keep things clear I will do the same.

More specifically, then, it is senior representatives of the clans of Ephraim that come to see David at Hebron. It is a meeting reminiscent of the one that

made Saul king, though also very different from it. The last time the clans and the elders appeared in this story was when Saul was designated king. The dynamic is a little like that in a parliamentary democracy - once every few years the people get their chance to choose their leadership but then the people can be ignored until the next election. So on this occasion the people and their representatives are involved as they were once before. But there is no prophet in this story. There is no present word from Yahweh to declare that this is the moment to take action. There is no gathering at the shrine, no journey to where the covenant chest was. The people's action is indeed based on a word that Yahweh uttered in the past about David's being destined to shepherd Israel. But that consideration comes only third to the fact that the Ephraimites and David share the same history and that David had been leading the whole people (militarily) for a long time. They speak of a common history in terms of being of the same 'bone and flesh'. Hebrew 'bone' suggests strength, while 'flesh' suggests frailty, so 'we are your bone and flesh' perhaps means 'we and you have been through good times and bad times, triumph and adversity, together' (Brueggemann).

The Ephraimites and David make a covenant, and it takes place 'before Yahweh', but Yahweh is thus a witness to the covenant not a party to it. The covenant is merely a formal agreement between some human beings making common cause. Its significance lies not least in establishing that there are two sides to the arrangement whereby David becomes king over northern Israel. They will accept his leadership, but he also accepts some answerability to them.

There is also anointing at this meeting, but it is not commissioned by Yahweh or executed by a person such as a prophet or priest (though of course David had been anointed by Samuel long before). The Ephraimites recall that Yahweh preferred to designate the earthly monarch 'leader' rather than king. They thus recall the ambiguity that attaches to human kingship and the need to leave room for Yahweh to be the real king, but it is a low-key recollection. Yahweh had declared that the shepherd-boy would become the shepherd-king (5:2) (Brueggemann). 'Shepherd' was a standard middle-eastern image for the king, one that suggested authority and responsibility. But we have noted that shepherding is a calling that demands a capacity for ruthless violence. As long as that ruthlessness is exercised towards the sheep's enemies, things are fine, but shepherds often end up (as Ezekiel 34 puts it) feeding on the sheep instead of feeding the sheep.

Establishing a Centre of Power

David's becoming king over the whole people is thus in continuity with all that has proceeded, but also in discontinuity with it. The process is one from which God is more distant than has been the case before. The position David takes up looks more like the kingship that other nations had, which Israel had asked for. It anticipates the process whereby the church in the second century came to be dominated by the institutional structures that still characterize it.

David's first act is to get himself a capital city. In due course this will be described as the city Yahweh chose, but to judge from the way the story is told, that description is after-the-fact. At the beginning of Jerusalem's story as an Israelite city, it is twice described as the city of David, not the city of God. David himself designates it such (5:9). The people who take it for David are 'David's men' (5:6). It seems that the people as a whole now comprises Judah, Ephraim, and 'David's men'. The last are a body whose primary loyalty is personal. They are people who have come to 'belong' to David over those years as an outlaw, some of them disaffected Israelites, some of them Hittites, Gittites, and so on. The dynamics of what it means to be Israel are thus changing, too.

Jerusalem was of course within the area promised to Israel and was thus destined to come under Israelite rule, but that applied to many parts of the land that were not yet under Israelite control. Historians plausibly speculate about the reasons for David's immediate march on Jerusalem in particular. It was an ancient but small town in an inaccessible area off the main road on the top of a mountain ridge. It was in these respects a strange place to locate your capital. Yet it lay between Gibeah and Hebron, and thus in neutral territory between the centre of Saul's monarchy and the centre of the area David has ruled since Saul's death. Politically David's action thus made good sense. Strategically it might make a strange form of sense too, for Jerusalem's inaccessibility gave it military security. There would be occasions when enemy armies would not bother to trudge up the mountains to lay siege to Jerusalem, and occasions when its natural strength frustrated armies that did so bother.

The original city stood on a rocky spur protected by steep slopes on three sides. All of it was outside what is now known as the 'Old City' of Jerusalem. It was outside the city's medieval walls, to the southeast. Only the north side of the spur was vulnerable to attack. It had a spring on the east side. This was low down the slope and it was therefore vulnerable to enemy attack, but the city's Jebusite inhabitants had cut a clever shaft from inside the city to the water source. This gave them a sense of security that will have seemed entirely justified until David turned this feature of their strength into their weak point. They felt entirely relaxed in the conviction that no one could take their city, perhaps taunting attackers with the idea that disabled people and blind people could satisfactorily defend it (but the words are obscure). Meanwhile David's men surprised them by shinning up their water shaft and the city fell. At least that is the cinematographic version of what went on, though the description is obscure, too. It may just mean that David found a way to cut off the city's water supply and thus force it to surrender, which would have been as notable an achievement.

A king, or the leader of some institution or organization, may live at a time in its history when external constraints and pressures play a great part in determining what issues need to be given priority. Your leadership then has to be largely reactive. Or that leader may live at a time when there are fewer external constraints and pressures, and may thus be free to be more proactive. For most of Old Testament times, Israel was under the domination of great external powers - Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece. For two short centuries at either end of that sequence of empires it could breathe more freely. The Philistines remain a pressure, of course, and Israel is involved in periodic squabbles with Ammon and other neighbours, but David does not have to worry about an imperial big brother trying to impose a policy framework on him. He can decide what to do.

First he takes up residence in 'the Stronghold', the fortified highpoint of the little city. It is this that he names 'the city of David'. It will have been somewhere just below the Temple Mount as it is in Jerusalem now - that area was open countryside higher up the mountain. We will read of how it becomes designated as the Temple Mount in due course. David undertakes a major building programme within the fortified bounds of the city. One may guess that this relates to the new significance of the city. It has been simply *the* city of the Jebusites, who were merely a small subset of the Canaanites. It is now becoming the administrative centre of the Israelites, who are small beer by our standards but are a bigger deal by the standards of the day and the area. David has accumulated that entourage over those years on the run, 'David's men'. The bandits and outlaws have become the administration, and they need places to live and work.

The fact that Israel is becoming a bigger deal by the standards of the day is reflected in the friendly overtures he receives from Hiram, the king of Tyre. Hiram evidently reckons it will be wise to make David an ally and offers him

building materials (cedar-wood from Lebanon) and skilled labour to build himself a house. It is a sign that the promise to Abraham is being fulfilled as Israel receives the recognition of powerful peoples around. It is also a worrying anticipation of the times when alliances with other nations and building in cedar will be the marks of the degeneration of David's line (see e.g. Isaiah 31; Jeremiah 22:13-15) (Brueggemann).

The Philistines are naturally less thrilled to discover that David is doing so well. They would have strategic reasons for this, but one might imagine them a little piqued to discover the extent to which he has taken them for a ride. So they decide to nip this little monarchy in the bud. But they are already too late. David has fortified the city and taken up residence in his Stronghold there, or maybe in a 'stronghold' somewhere else - previously the word referred to his fortress at Adullam. David is in a position to choose his moment for taking the Philistines on, and he does so. He defeats them twice on the classic local battlefield at Rephaim, where there is room for armies to do their business. The Philistines abandon the images of their gods there, and David and his men carry them off. It is a nice reversal of that grievous day when the Philistines did the same with the covenant chest.

There is no question of Yahweh bowing down to these images as Dagon did to Yahweh, though in fact we are not told what David did with the images. If anything, the story implies that the army took them as military trophies. It is another little sign of a secular note that runs through these stories. It is thus parallel to the description of David's being made king by human initiative and procedures rather than by divine guidance.

It parallels the casual record of the concubines and wives David now took in Jerusalem and the children he begot. We are not exactly sure of the difference between wives and concubines. The latter may be women who belong to David but continue to live in their fathers' house. They are a bit like the multiple residences or cars that are accumulated by rock stars and film stars and other moneyed people. You do not need them all and you cannot use them all very often, but they are an important sign of your status.

Indeed, the text says not that he took those wives and concubines 'in' Jerusalem but that he took them 'from' Jerusalem, which implies that they are Jebusites. We may be glad that he did not kill all the men, women, and children there, as Joshua would have done. But the reason Joshua was supposed to do that was to keep Israel itself pure. David's action is a politically astute one in binding the people of Jerusalem to himself by these marital and quasi-marital arrangements. David is behaving like a king. But it is not exactly the Old Testament vision.

Yet alongside that streak in the story is one that works in exactly the opposite way. David won those two battles not merely because he made use of his freedom to decide when to fight, but because he consulted Yahweh about the matter. On the first occasion Yahweh simply assured him that this was indeed the moment to fight. On the second Yahweh gave him the tactical plan for the battle, or rather promised David that he would hear the sound of heaven's armies marching out to battle. This would mean that they would do the fighting and that David simply had to do the mopping up. It is a repeat of the victory in Exodus 17 when Moses is commanding the army above as Joshua is commanding the army below. It is also an anti-type of the second of the battle with the Philistines in Eli's day. There Israel had twice been defeated because Yahweh was not fighting for Israel. Now Philistia is twice defeated because Yahweh is fighting for Israel.

And at the centre of this account of David's first thousand days are two statements of the narrator's perception and about David's perception that have more general import.

'David became greater and greater, Yahweh, the God of Armies, being with him' (5:10). This establishing of a position of which we have been reading could be

read at a purely secular level, and historians often read it that way. But the narrator sees the activity of Yahweh behind it. The translators say explicitly that he flourished 'for' Yahweh was with him, but typically the text itself is more allusive than that. It puts those two statements next door to each other as I have just now, so it rules out the secular historians' perspective. But it does not quite say what the translators make it say. It leaves a little space between David's greatness and Yahweh's powerful presence, a space we may be glad of. It gives us the opportunity not to see everything that happens in this chapter as exactly what Yahweh would directly inspire or rejoice in. Yahweh is committed to David, but how David utilizes that resource may reflect other factors than Yahweh's ideal vision. The story relates David's initiatives and David's lucky breaks, and in those sees the results of God's being committed to him.

There is no logic that we can see about that commitment. God takes a man of huge potential as a leader and works with him and through him. We have seen enough of David to know that no one could argue that God was with David because he stood out spiritually or morally, and nothing that we will read in the rest of his story will suggest that he grows into being such a man.

The other statement is David's own. David himself 'knew that Yahweh had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingship for the sake of his people Israel' (5:12). In an earlier chapter I imagined David a little bemused by the way people fell in love with him, looking over his shoulder wondering who was the person they were so smitten by. Here perhaps he is doing that in relation to his relationship with Yahweh. When the long-term prisoner Nelson Mandela or the long-term exile Yasser Arafat finally becomes president or arrives on the soil of his native land, I imagine that henceforth they must often pinch themselves and wonder whether this impossible dream has actually thus been fulfilled. David has lived from hand to mouth as an outlaw for years, and now finds himself in the palace, and each morning he awakens with surprise. He is astonished at what has happened, and he knows it is Yahweh's doing, for the sake of his people Israel.

But how profoundly did he perceive the significance of his own punchline? Is that where the point of the statement lies? Did David realize that the reason Yahweh had established him and exalted his kingship was Yahweh's concern for Israel? Leaders have a hard time recognizing that they are servants in that sense. How far is the narrator playing a trick on David in attributing this perception to him? Indeed, when the narrator refers to 'his people Israel', is this David's people or Yahweh's people? Does that ambiguity bring out the point?

Yahweh 'has exalted his kingship for the sake of his people Israel'. Does that statement deconstruct? Is it possible to exalt a man's kingship for the sake of his people, or is it inevitable that the man will come to matter more than the people do? That is David's challenge, though not his only one. The chapter has hinted at some others, though perhaps they are variants on the one. Can David behave like a middle-eastern king with his city and his palace and still be a king for his people? Can he behave like a king with all those wives and concubines and still be a king for his people? To reverse the question, can David be a king appointed by his people (where the chapter starts) and also be a king who works by asking for Yahweh's guidance over policy matters (where the chapter ends)?

Finding a Home for the Covenant Chest

Once again an army assembles, a combination of professional troops and a mass mobilization. It is to take some action in the direction from which David has only just cleaned out the Philistines. But its task turns out to be something

very different from battle. For decades the covenant chest has been at Kiriat Je`arim, a day's walk through the mountains west of Jerusalem towards Philistine territory and the Mediterranean. David decides to bring it to Jerusalem.

The success of David's choice of Jerusalem as a capital makes it difficult for us to think ourselves back into a situation where Jerusalem had no Israelite connections. There were many places that did have such connections, places where people had worshipped Yahweh or where Yahweh had spoken and acted - places such as Gilgal or Mizpah or Bethel or Shiloh. Jerusalem was not one of them. It was simply one of the towns occupied by local non-Israelite peoples. Making it Israel's capital constituted a monumental innovation. We are never told that Yahweh had commissioned this act. Yahweh had told David to go up the Hebron (2:1). Going up to Jerusalem was something that David thought of for himself.

Jerusalem therefore needed to gain some Yahwistic credentials, and moving the covenant chest there constituted a fine start to that process. The covenant chest stood for some realities at the heart of Israel's faith. It stood for the reality and the power of Yahweh, for Yahweh's distinctiveness as the God who could not be imaged, for Yahweh's entering into a special relationship with Israel, for Yahweh's acting as Israel's deliverer from oppression, for Yahweh's presence, for the fact that Yahweh had expectations of Israel. When one thinks about these, it becomes astonishing that Saul and David had left the chest at Kiriat Je`arim all those years. This may have been for practical reasons. Perhaps the Philistines needed to be cleaned out from the area before the move could be attempted. But perhaps it was entirely understandable for other reasons. The covenant chest is a piece of hot theological and ethical property. If David sees political potential in associating himself with it and associating it with his innovatory capital, he will not be able to escape the fact that it also makes demands.

If David is thinking politically, this is not to imply that that is his entire motivation. While David is a politician, he is not just a politician. Yet there is a worrying difference between this and the preceding story about his battles. There David clearly recognized that Yahweh needed to be in control. For all his military expertise, David consulted Yahweh about when to take the Philistines on, and got clear answers. Here there is no such asking and no such speaking. Perhaps David is too close to being just a politician. 'Immediate recourse to Yahweh when one's life is threatened is one thing (5.17-25), continuing to consult his interests when they may very well cut across one's own is a very different matter' (Murray, p. 87).

Once again a new carriage is built for the covenant chest and it is brought out of the house of Abinadab where Eleazar had had charge of it. Two different sons (or grandsons?) take charge of the carriage. One apparently sits on the carriage, the other walks in front with the oxen. The chest is thus carried in a great procession that winds up and down and round narrow mountain tracks along the top of the Judean mountain ridge on its journey east. We do not know what time of year it was, but I imagine it as a lovely summer day, hot and sunny but breezy, like the day I once visited Kiriat Je`arim. 'Forest Village' is what the name means, and that is what it still is, even though those were days before the deforestation of the mountains around. The joyous scene is like one from some film version of *Much Ado about Nothing*, except that it has God there too. For David and the whole procession are not merely dancing. They are 'dancing before Yahweh with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.' Indeed, I think it is my favourite moment in the entire David story, the moment I would like to have frozen, and the moment I would like the story to stop.

That is partly because it then gets doubly spoiled. Arguably it is not David's fault. Indeed arguably it is no one's fault. This turns out to be one of those moments with which we are familiar, when a magical day that seemed an anticipation of heaven is suddenly turned into a nightmare because of something

someone does or says without realizing what they are doing or saying. Indeed, it happens twice.

They are making their way along one of those twisting mountain tracks, but they are at a point where the going should not have been too hard because they are near 'the threshing floor of Nacon' (6:6; Microsoft Word wants me to correct that to 'Bacon', but I shall decline). A threshing floor is a place where you can beat the wheat to get the chaff out. You then throw it into the air by the forkful, so that the wind can carry the chaff away, because the chaff is light. Meanwhile the good wheat falls back to the ground into a nice pile. So this is a small piece of open ground, elevated but level. But near this threshing floor the oxen that are pulling the carriage apparently stumble, and the covenant chest apparently wobbles on the carriage, and Uzzah, one of Abinadab's sons, apparently reaches out to grab it, to stop it falling.

I say 'apparently' because the picture is very allusive, and I have had to fill in some gaps to try to make sense of what happened, to 'tame and make sense of a difficult text' (Penchansky, p. 23). There is something appropriate about the fact that we cannot quite work out what happened. That mirrors or anticipates the fact that we also have to guess the reason or the meaning of what happened next. 'And Yahweh's anger burnt against Uzzah and God struck him there.' He dropped dead by the covenant chest.

And David got angry, too (the story uses the same word as it uses of Yahweh) because Yahweh had burst out like that against Uzzah. Who is he angry at? At God? At Uzzah? At what happened? At himself? Or is he just angry at the spoiling of this wondrous moment? After all, Uzzah was only doing the kind of thing he was supposed to do. If the explanation is that there were other people who should have been carrying the chest (cf 1 Chronicles 15:13), that hardly makes it feel fairer on Uzzah.

And when David has stopped being angry, he is left being scared of this God. It turns out that Yahweh can burst out on an Israelite doing his best to look after Yahweh's covenant chest the same way as Yahweh burst out on Israel's enemies (6:7-8: the words are the same as in 5:20). The regular Hebrew word for 'fearing' God covers both what we would call reverence and what we would call being afraid. Applied to God, it usually denotes reverence and the translation 'fear of God' is misleading. Here David's subsequent actions show that fear is what it means.

As David reacts to this event with anger, we as readers do the same. There is an occasion of some similarity in Jerusalem in the first weeks of the church's life. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on the little group of people who knew that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They have experienced a wondrous transformation and through them God has been speaking to the whole city of Jerusalem. They are living a life of generosity and sharing that realizes the Old Testament ideal in a way it has never been realized before. And then one couple pretend that they are part of this generosity when they are not, and Peter confronts them, and they drop dead. And 'great fear seized the whole church' (Acts 5:11), like the fear David felt. It is as if you cannot have a moment of highest joy that anticipates heaven itself without being immediately back to earth with a bump. And perhaps that is the point.

I imagine that God indeed one of the objects of David's anger, perhaps the main one. The Old Testament is quite accepting of anger as an emotion, both on God's part and on ours. It thus has a quite different attitude to anger from ours. The Psalms often refer to God's anger and they often express anger. They often ask why God behaves in ways that seem wrong to us. They never get answers, but this does not stop them pressing the question. In the same way, David would doubtless like to press God about why such a terrible consequence follows from such a trivial, well-intentioned act on Uzzah's part, but he will get no answer. The only response Old or New Testaments give to such questions is the one Jesus gave when people asked him about a disaster that took place

just a few miles from this one, 'Be careful lest you perish in the same way' (cf Luke 13:5). And perhaps that is implicit in the way David responded to this event with fear as well as with anger, like the people in the Jerusalem church seized by a great fear. The moment of highest joy is one where we need to keep in mind that our God is volcanic and unpredictable, not cuddly and cozy.

With some irony David has made the same discovery as the Philistines. They thought that Yahweh was under their control but they found that Yahweh was capable of acting independently of their schemes and of causing them a lot of trouble in order to demonstrate who was God. I have suggested that David thought he could treat Yahweh's covenant chest as a political asset to buttress his throne and enhance the prestige of this capital he had devised, 'the city of David'. He is offered the discovery that Yahweh will not be used like that. One of the basic rules of relating to Yahweh is that you must not make wrongful use of Yahweh's name (Exodus 20:7). Implicitly, David has been involved in doing that. The rule declared that Yahweh would not acquit anyone who misuses that name. Perhaps Uzzah has paid the price to enable David to make this discovery.

Perhaps. Apparently. But the story does not say so, and I imagine the reason is that the storytellers did not know. They knew that there was a near-accident involving the chest and that Uzzah then dropped dead, and they sensed that this was somehow an expression of Yahweh's anger, but they did not know why. But they did not leave out the story for that reason, as we might do. And we may be glad, because we have experiences of an analogous kind when moments of praise and joy get spoiled and lives get spoiled or lost. What the story does for us is encourage us to own them rather than bracket them out of our consciousness. It encourages us to associate God with them rather than leave God out of them. Better an angry God than one who is not in control, the Old Testament assumes. And it encourages us to have the right attitude to God when accidents happen, which is anger and fear.

David's reaction is like that of the Philistines. He now no longer wants this nuclear reactor anywhere near the 'city of David' (2 Samuel 6:10). Instead it ends up in the care of a man called Obed Edom who is from ... Gath. He is presumably therefore a Philistine, like Goliath from Gath (unless this is a different Gath).

Watching Love Turn to Contempt

The covenant chest stays with Obed Edom for three months, and Yahweh blesses the entire household. I guess this means that the crops grow well, people recover from illnesses, women who could not have children are suddenly pregnant. And by this blessing David is reminded of the obverse of the threat that Yahweh can be. Perhaps it is worth having another try, with more of a focus on Yahweh. Perhaps the end is not the end. Once again David sets out to bring the covenant chest to Jerusalem. Once again he dances, though a different, rare word is used, which might mean rather that he is strumming his guitar. Once again there is great joy about the event. This time, when the procession has gone six paces, David sacrifices an ox and a calf, and presumably this is an indication of a new attitude to Yahweh, of a lesson having been learned.

But I said that this moment got doubly spoiled. At first sight the second spoiling is very different from the first. It is personal and relational and probably private, rather than institutional and religious and public. There is no death involved, though there is a withering of life. And indirectly, the second issues from the first.

The sacrifices indicate that the second attempt to bring the covenant chest to Jerusalem is an event that involves religious ritual. David is thus dressed in the clothing of someone leading worship, including the short skirt-like

garment of a priest, an ephod made of linen. The rules for worship in Leviticus prescribe that a priest in an ephod also wears undershorts, but evidently David did not have these. As this lively procession reaches Jerusalem and passes the palace, Michal, one of David's wives, looks out of the palace window and sees David making an indelicate exhibition of himself, exposing himself like some drunk, and inside she is overcome with contempt.

Meanwhile the procession reaches its destination, a tent David has pitched for the covenant chest. In the story of the Exodus there are a number of references to a portable tent-shrine for the covenant chest. Obviously that kind of shrine would be the appropriate thing for a people on the move through the wilderness from Sinai to Canaan. It would be an equivalent to the tents that everyone else lived in. It seems likely that the covenant chest had often continued to live in a tent like that since the people had reached Canaan, though some passages imply a more permanent 'house'. The people themselves of course now live in houses, and soon David will propose building one for Yahweh's covenant chest, but religious observances tend to be conservative. Ministers wear the garb of a century or a millennium ago. David has thus pitched a tent for the covenant chest in the city, presumably in the area that especially belonged to him, near the palace. They set it in this tent and David offers sacrifices before Yahweh and blesses the people and distributes festival food to them, and they all go home in high spirits. How could this day possibly be spoiled?

David, too, goes home, to bless his household. Michal comes out to meet him, not with an embrace but with a rebuke. 'How the king of Israel honoured himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!' It is the first time anyone addresses David as 'king of Israel', and it is to rebuke him if not to curse him, a curse that contrasts with the blessing that David seeks to bring that day (Gelander, pp. 46-51). I don't care who was watching, David replies. Yahweh was the one before whom I was dancing. And I bet the maids you are talking about know that and honour it.

Both Michal and David of course were right. When you hear a married couple argue, you often want to intervene and try to get each of them to look at it from the other's angle, because it is often the case that both of them are right. David needs to see it Michal's way and Michal needs to see it David's way. From Michal's angle, David has spoiled this day by making an exhibition of himself. It would have cost nothing to be a bit more discrete. The very fact that Israel came to have that rule for priests shows that Yahweh believes in some discretion. And if he is really dancing before Yahweh, why is he so enthusiastic about the idea of the ordinary women admiring him (6:22)? From David's angle, Michal has spoiled this day by being concerned about dress code on a day for flinging such concerns to the winds. She has failed to share in the joy of this stupendous occasion.

I noted that this moment that spoils the celebration is more personal and relational than the first, but it also has public and political overtones. That is typical of David's story. The private and relational and familial cannot be separated from the public and national. In relating the incident, the narrator twice describes Michal as 'Saul's daughter'. And in his riposte to Michal, David comments on the fact that the God before whom he was celebrating was the one who chose him in place of Michal's father and his entire household (for instance, Michal's brothers). Michal's rebuke is also another last gasp of Saul's family in its antipathy to David's kingship. Indeed, it will not actually be the last. Saul will continue to haunt David.

That connects with the frighteningly laconic footnote with which the chapter ends. 'And Michal, Saul's daughter, had no child to the day of her death' (6:23). In itself it is a very elusive observation. Did Michal spend her life longing for the children she could never conceive? What would this mean in a

society where having children is the mark of full womanhood? Is this an act of punishment on Yahweh's part? Is she Yahweh's victim as well as David's and Saul's? Yahweh often closes wombs, but this is not one of the occasions when that is explicit. As far as we know, Michal had had no children with Paltiel. Did she want none, because David was the man she loved? But henceforth did David never want to make love to Michal, nor Michal to David? That would be easy to understand if they never got beyond this confrontation, though again it is not explicit. Did Michal never want to bear a child to David? Is that a consequence when love turns to contempt? Indeed, is there not some sexual jealousy behind Michal's protest? Does Michal feel that David is behaving as if he is sexually available to anyone but her (Clines, *Michal*, p. 138)? Had they ever made love? They had slept together, no doubt, but Michal stands alongside her brother Jonathan as a person who loved David but whose love seems never to have been reciprocated. Was all that she got the one night that was due to the member of a harem? The relationship was always skewed. David had never given himself to her the way he had given himself to Yahweh before all those young women.

Whatever is the precise truth about all that, David and Michal's story interweaves the personal/relational and the political/dynastic in such a way that they can hardly be separated. In theory the political and the personal can be distinguished, but in practice this is harder. The two interfere with each other, because as human beings David and Michal are each one person, both relational and political. When they take off their royal robes, they do not then cease to be king and king's daughter. When they put on their royal robes, they do not cease to be a woman who loved and a man who did not know how to do so.

If David and Michal never had sexual relations again, this is not merely because they never overcame a marital disagreement of the kind that any couple might have. It is because they continued to embody the tension between the house of Saul and the house of David. It is 'Saul's daughter' who never has children. A child of this union would have represented the house of Saul and the house of David and would have had the potential to be a uniting force for the nation. Would this have made a huge difference a generation later, when the kingdom falls apart after Solomon and divides between the north (where Saul came from) and the south (David's home)? Might a child of this union have held it together? If so, this event has not merely spoiled a celebration but split a kingdom. It is another reminder of the frightening way that one small act can have devastating long-term consequences.

14

The Man Who Wanted to Build a House (2 Samuel 7)

A House for Yahweh

There comes a moment when David's first 1000 days are over. He has a capital. He has a house to live in - remember, he has spent most of his adult life on the run. He is no longer looking over his shoulder at who may be the next danger to his life. He has rest from all his enemies (7:1). Admittedly this is an exaggeration if it means people such as Philistines and Moabites and another indication that we are sometimes told this story in dramatic rather than chronological order. The point about the remark may be that David has no immediate crises, or perhaps that he can breathe more easily within the confines of his own territory. He has no rivals for his throne. The next chapter will

tell us about the exception who proves the rule, Saul's disabled grandson Meribaal.

David can sleep at night. But he has a bad conscience about doing so. Why should he sleep in a house with solid rock foundations and brick superstructure and nice cedar paneling, when the covenant chest has only a tent? We have seen one or two good reasons for this, and we will soon learn of one or two more, but we can also see reasons why it would seem odd. We know from 1 Samuel that Dagon had a decent house, and we know from archeological discoveries that other gods in Palestine also had them. Indeed, Yahweh had had a house at Shiloh, one impressive enough to be described as a palace (1:7, 9). Hebrew does not have a word for 'temple', so it applies the word for 'palace' to the impressive house where its divine king lives. But perhaps the story was using the words you would use later and the covenant chest's home was actually rather more humble, or perhaps the shrine at Shiloh has been destroyed by now (see Jeremiah 7:12).

One way or another it has become natural for David to reflect that if Israel is becoming a proper state to stand alongside other middle-eastern states, Yahweh's covenant chest should have a house, as Dagon's image did. So David raises the question with his prophetic consultant, Nathan. Perhaps it is an indication that he has learned a lesson from the earlier catastrophe with the covenant chest.

Now the notion of the king having a prophetic consultant is a noteworthy one. In a way Nathan's role is analogous to Samuel's in relation to Saul, but Nathan seems to have become part of the royal court. He is there in Jerusalem. This puts him under considerable pressure. The point about prophets is that they should be independent of the institutional system. They need to have access to the kings in order to press them, when it seems that Samuel's warnings about kingship are coming true. But in order to be able to do that, they need not to be on the king's payroll. But it looks as if Nathan was a full-time state employee.

This is a pressure we will see Nathan escaping at his great moment in a few chapters' time (12:1-15), but when David proposes an exercise in temple building, for a moment the pressure overcomes him. 'Good idea', he tells David. 'Yahweh is with you.'

There are people who make decisions easily and speak quickly and respond to questions briskly, but this does not mean that their decisions and answers are always good ones. I know. I am one. So, perhaps, was Nathan. Later, perhaps he himself began to think about David's question and reconsider his instinctive response, as he had dinner or joined in the evening prayers or thought over the day before he fell asleep. Anyway that night Nathan heard from Yahweh.

'Hmmm. This house. For me. As it's my house, do you think I should be consulted? I don't mean about how many bathrooms or whether to have a split-level oven. I mean about the whole idea of a house. I've never been very keen on houses. I've always liked to be on the move. I like being able to act in different places, and not having a house helped to ensure that no one thought I had settled down. Did I ever ask for a house? Am I not the kind of God who speaks when I think it is time to do something of that kind, and says how to do it? (Fourteen chapters in Exodus concern the giving of instructions for a tent, and the implementing of these instructions.) The 'house' Yahweh had at Shiloh proves the rule. Yahweh was not 'stuck' there permanently. This house of David's will be a different proposition. Yahweh applies a hermeneutic of suspicion to David's generous desire to build Yahweh a house. It looks like a move to control Yahweh.

Yahweh's theological objections to a temple for God are closely related to the fundamental theological objections to images, which we noted in connection with the Dagon story. Yahweh is a God who speaks and acts in the midst of life and keeps doing so in new places. People prefer their God to be someone predictable, someone they can find in a certain place on a certain day. David

wants to turn Yahweh into that kind of God. Leaders especially need to be able to do that. David is in a position to live a more settled life now, and he wants Yahweh to do so. The moment is like the one that will come in the history of the church, when the Christian movement begins to settle down and people start building churches where you can be sure to find God at 11.00 on Sunday morning.

A House for David

Yahweh has another theological problem with the idea of David building a temple. It somehow reverses the proper nature of the relationship, and denies its nature over all those years before David could settle down. Over those years, it was Yahweh who was the subject of the sentences. Yahweh took David from being a shepherd, Yahweh was with him, Yahweh protected him from his enemies. Yahweh wishes to continue being the subject of the sentences. I will make you a great name, I will take Israel into a settled position in which invaders will never trouble them, I will give you rest from all your enemies (perhaps foreign enemies are now referred to)....

And I will make you a house (7:11). Yes, Yahweh wishes to be the subject of that sentence, too, but also wishes to play on the meaning of the word 'house'. Of course it is too late for Yahweh to offer to build David a brick and cedar house. It is nice that there is no prophetic reproof for the fact that David has already built one, of the kind that Haggai might have gone in for when the people have changed Yahweh's attitude to houses but then also changed their own (Haggai 1). It is a household of people that Yahweh is interested in, not a house of bricks and cedar.

Theologically this is all very suggestive. First, Yahweh's insistence on remaining the subject of the verbs is a reminder that Yahweh's initiative, Yahweh's grace, Yahweh's promise continue to have priority but continue to need reasserting. David's own life has made it clear that everything depends on Yahweh's initiative and promise and grace, even though it has also made it clear that nothing would have been achieved if David had not gone along with them. But things are more settled now, and the promises have been fulfilled, and maybe David will not need Yahweh's grace and initiative in the same way. David is in a position to do something for Yahweh. And this is therefore a dangerous moment.

There are parallels between the way David's story is told and the way Abraham's story is told. The covenant Yahweh now makes with David has resonances from Yahweh's covenant with Abraham. As Paul will eventually point out, Abraham's story is the great exposition of the priority of God's initiative, God's grace, and God's promise. Only with Moses does Yahweh allow room for expressing the necessity of Israel doing something in response to Yahweh's initiative. Abraham does have to go along with Yahweh's promise. He has to make the journey to Canaan. But that is all he has to do. There are no great achievements, and there are a number of blunders, to make the point even clearer. In due course I will let Solomon play Moses to your Abraham, says Yahweh - I will let Solomon build me a house. But I will not let you. A later version of this story will suggestively add that Yahweh prefers to have this house built by someone who has not been involved in so much bloodshed (1 Chronicles 22:8), but on this occasion that consideration is not on Yahweh's list of reasons.

Yahweh's interest in a house of people rather than a house of cedar points even further back in the Old Testament story, to the very creation. When the Babylonians told the story of the origin of the world, they portrayed the shaping of human beings as servants of the gods in a way that was parallel to Israel's story. But their creation story actually finishes with the building of

a house for Marduk, the chief Babylonian god. The creation story is also the story of the origin of the temple in Babylon.

You could say that the Old Testament creation story ends up with the creation of a house, but it is a different sort of house. The world is a house for God and a house for humanity, and God wishes to build humanity a house. God blesses human beings and encourages them to go and multiply. God's involvement with them does not require them to serve God by building a house. It does involve God building them a house. Yahweh hints at a recollection of creation as well as a recollection of Abraham in order to put David right theologically over the same question. Don't ever start thinking that you have responsibility for your relationship with Yahweh, that you do Yahweh the favours.

A Risky Commitment

The priority of Yahweh's initiative is underlined by the risky commitment that follows. The creator of an empire is inclined to wonder what will happen after he is gone (I think there might be a gender question here, so I will leave the 'he'). What will happen after David? This new Israelite state is his creation. Will it survive him? Yahweh promises that it will. Yahweh will establish David's line in Israel permanently and will relate to David's son as a father relates to a son.

We take for granted the idea of a father-child relationship between God and us. The Old Testament generally avoids it. It is a rather dangerous idea. In Israel's world people as in ours believed that there was a 'natural' relationship between gods and human beings. Of course God is like a father to us. There are dangers to that assumption. It gives people the impression that they can take God for granted. It makes the relationship with God too cozy. The Old Testament pictures Yahweh's relationship with Israel not as a natural relationship or one that comes about by accident but as a special relationship that God has brought about by a deliberate action. It is like a covenant between human beings. Indeed, this relationship between God and David's son will be a covenantal one. It will be as close and personal as a family relationship, but as deliberate and intentional as a covenant.

So usually the father-son image is avoided because it is misleading, but Yahweh here sees a particular advantage in describing the relationship in familial terms. It allows for conflict in the relationship that is not terminal. When two people seal a covenant or contract or treaty or agreement (these are all the same word in Hebrew), there are terms to that relationship. If one party breaks the terms, the relationship is imperilled. But the familial model allows for conflict. On the basis of this being a father-son relationship, Yahweh says, if David's successor fails to behave like a son, Yahweh can discipline him the way a father disciplines a son. It does not mean the end of the relationship. Discipline is a natural part of it. Yahweh had not promised this relationship to Saul, and when Saul broke the terms of the relationship, it did imperil it. With David's line, this will not be so.

There is no reason why Yahweh could not have undertaken a relationship of that kind with Saul, of course. It was just Saul's ill fortune to be the first king. He was the one who showed that in the future a relationship that allowed for human failure was going to be needed. There is another parallel with the opening chapters of Genesis, here with the story of the great flood. The generations since the flood have been no less violent and perverse than the generations before the flood, but they have not experienced the kind of destruction that happened at the great flood. The reason is that God came to the conclusion that this kind of destruction served no purpose. Humanity is just like that (Genesis 8:21). God has to make allowances. So it will be with future kings. Indeed, so it has been with David, who gets away with murder and

other acts when Saul gets away with nothing. We have seen that the fact that David is a man after God's heart does not mean that Yahweh is the kind of man God approves of. It simply means that David is the one God chose. 'Because of your promise and according to your heart you have done this great thing', David will later acknowledge (7:21). Not because he is a man after God's own heart in the sense we attribute to those words.

Nathan has learned his lesson. Having recovered from the experience of God waking him up and putting him right, Nathan hastens to the palace. And having heard him out, David hastens to that tent that he wants to replace, and sits before Yahweh there.

I like that picture. In the Old Testament you do not sit to worship. They had no chairs in the temple, just as they had none in medieval cathedrals. In worship you either stand to praise or pray, or you prostrate yourself.

So why is David sitting on this occasion? I wonder whether it is because he is gob-smacked. He has a right to be overwhelmed by what he has now heard from Yahweh. His response to Yahweh is spot on. He indeed acknowledges that there is nothing about him that can have made Yahweh make this commitment. He is no better a man than Saul. There is no rational basis for what Yahweh has done for him so far, and no rational basis for what Yahweh has now promised.

At least there is no rational basis in who David was or who his family was. But there is a rational basis of another kind. 'This is torah for the people, sovereign Yahweh', David goes on (7:19). Admittedly it is an enigmatic comment. Does he mean, for instance, 'there are theological lessons for the people in what you have said - theological lessons about God and about how God relates to people'? Or does he mean 'this commitment you have made to me is the foundation and the security of the people's own life from now on, and they need to know it'? Whatever is right in detail, David's comment implies that he recognizes that he and his successors are not significant in their own right, just as Saul was not. It is for the people's sake that in his prayer he can go on simply to ask God to do what God has promised.

We are inclined to focus on the rights of the individual and the importance of the individual's relationship with God. This may make it difficult for us to come to terms with the way the Bible subordinates the individual to the people of God and to God's purpose in the world and God's purpose in history. In the Bible, the individual's relationship with God is not the all-important thing that it is for us. Otherwise the Bible would be another kind of book, something more like a book about spirituality. In focusing on the personalities of individuals in this book I am colluding with our priorities, but we need to see that we are bringing agenda and theological convictions to the text in assuming that this is what it must be about. Scripture takes us away from our absorption with our individual selves and expects us to see ourselves as existing (at least sometimes) for the sake of a bigger picture that God is painting. That works more pleasantly for David than for Saul, though for Saul, too, it had the potential to make it possible to live with the toughness of his experience.

When you are leader, it is not you that matters. You are in your position for the sake of your people. This is a principle that Christians pay lip service to, but we hardly face its implications as they emerge in the price that leaders such as Moses and Saul pay for their people and the benefits that leaders such as David and Solomon receive because of their people. God's real concern is the people. You are a means to an end. That may benefit you, or it may cost you. That is not the point. You are expected to be happy either way (or rather, it does not matter whether you are happy either way). If we believe leadership involves service, this is what that implies.

It is noteworthy that David recognizes the fact. God's commitment to him is made for the edification of his people. Thus David goes on to reflect on the unique way Yahweh has related to Israel, going to another country to ransom a people from there and bring them here and entering into relationship with them (7:23).

This promise of Yahweh's relates to David's son who will succeed him, though it also relates to David's future descendants. Among the Psalms there is one, Psalm 72, entitled 'A Psalm of Solomon'. Perhaps 'A Psalm for Solomon' would be a better translation. It is a psalm with a particularly exalted vision for kingship. It talks about the king having a great name and about his throne enduring forever and about his enemies being defeated, in the manner of Yahweh's promise here. But it talks about all the nations finding blessing through him, in the manner of Yahweh's promise to Abraham. And it talks about the king as the means of his people being a fair society in which the poor are defended and the oppressors put down. It does all that in the form of a prayer - 'God make the king the kind of person who gives us this kind of leadership'.

Now I have no doubt that Psalm 72 was used in the temple as a prayer, but it also reminds me of Paul's reports of his prayers. In these, Paul tells people what he is praying for them and what kind of people he is asking God to turn them into. I assume he does that partly because he wants them to know what kind of people he thinks they should be, so that they can commit themselves to being such people and be open to God's changing them into such people. Paul's prayers are horizontal as well as vertical - or rather, his reports of his prayers are.

I assume the same is true of Psalm 72. In effect that psalm puts together the promise of 2 Samuel 7 and the warnings about kings in 1 Samuel 8 and says that they belong together. In the light of the promises, kings had better heed the warnings. It asks God to make them do that, but it asks this in the hearing of the kings themselves as they took part in worship. The psalm functions as preaching as well as prayer.

Indeed, I assume that something similar is true about the story in 2 Samuel 7 itself. Why was such a story told over the generations? No doubt it was told as an encouragement to the king and to the people about the security of the king's throne. But it was also told as a reminder to the king and as a further encouragement to the people about the reason for his being on the throne. He is not there for his own sake. He is there for the sake of the people. He is there as part of the story of Yahweh's extraordinary involvement with the people of Israel since the time of the exodus. And the promise is there for their instruction, so that they know the nature of Yahweh's involvement with them. The story says 'David knew this. Do you [the current king] know it?'

15

The Men Who Used Women (2 Samuel 10-11)

No you are not allowed to read this chapter first. Read the book in order, for goodness' sake. I wrote it that way, didn't I?

I wrote that clever-clever first line when I had earlier entitled the chapter 'The man with a weakness for women'. It backfired on me when I realized that this was a misleading title. In general, the weakness with regard to women was not what we would have thought it was. That is part of the point. In the Old Testament, there is lots of sexual activity. But it is usually not sex for the sake of physical pleasure or sex for the sake of hiding from the reality of

meaninglessness or sex for the sake of the romantic ideal, in the way it is for us modern Western people. Most often it is sex for the sake of power.

I am talking about the men, of course. There are indications that women such as Abigail also knew how to use their sexuality, but this is a book about 'men behaving badly.'

Women

We are reading stories about the time when Israel made the transition from being an unsophisticated rural society to being a powerful centralized empire. The former context has some potential for realizing the vision that is implicit in the exodus story. The latter context will be more likely to work against it. An agricultural society based on the clan, the extended family, and the household, has the potential for placing similar value on the positions of women and men in family and society. Women and men may not fulfil the same roles, but they do fulfil complementary roles. Each is indispensable to the living of the basic life of the family, to there being somewhere to live and something to eat. Women may operate more in the domestic sphere and men in the public sphere, but it was clearer than it is for us that the domestic sphere is equally vital to life continuing, let alone flourishing. From a purely pragmatic and material viewpoint, if women do not bear children who will take part in the work of growing food, and if they do not look after the cooking of it, men will die. Women may be expected to spend their lives pregnant, barefoot, and in the kitchen, but this is not a despised position.

In David's day Israel is ceasing to be a subsistence society based on the household and the extended family and the clan and is becoming a society with a centre, a 'tributary' society, one that has to pay taxes. That puts pressure on ordinary people because they have to produce significantly more in order to keep the state apparatus going. Historically, it put control of much land into the hands of the state and/or of the rich, so that fewer people were able to live freely in self-sufficient communities.

We should not idealize the situation before the monarchy. The story of Nabal the sheep-magnate shows that there were already many people who were employed rather than working in a family context. But the existence of the monarchic state will encourage this development. So a woman's husband becomes someone who works *for* someone else rather than working *with* her, and her work at home becomes devalued in the way with which we are familiar.

It produces more radical differences in the style of life of people involved in this 'bureaucracy'. Samuel had drawn the people's attention to the fact that they would lose many of their daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers (1 Samuel 8:13). These might be the lucky ones, for one of the features of becoming a people like other peoples is that these daughters also become property and status symbols. Would-be kings such as David and Absalom need certain wives, or need to have sex with certain women, because somehow these women signify a relationship with authority and power. Occupying the women is a bit like occupying the palace. This begins with David's relationship with Michal. When he heard what the bride price was, David was very interested, because 'David liked the idea of being the king's son-in-law' (18:26): not the idea of being Michal's husband. This is not a romantic moment. 'What for the woman is an affair of the heart is for the man a means of upward mobility' (Jobling, p. 152). But when we read of David slaughtering a huge number of Philistines to gain the bride he desires, we are brought up short, because we remember Samson (Josipovici, p. 199).

Kings such as Saul and David then need a number of wives to show that they are important people. They need a number of 'concubines' as well, for the same reason. And the brilliant Ahithophel, David's one-time indispensable political

adviser, knows that a would-be king such as Absalom needs to show that he has taken David's place by having sex with David's concubines and making sure that everyone knows about it (2 Samuel 16:20-23).

Even in the telling of the story, women become subordinate to men. Hannah appears in the Old Testament because she is Samuel's mother. Michal appears because she is Saul's daughter. Abigail appears because she is Nabal's wife. Tamar appears because she is Absalom's sister. We know how Samuel and Absalom were born and died. Interestingly, we do not know how Saul and David were born, and we do not know the names of their mothers, but we know something of the shape of their lives as a whole, as well as how they died. Hannah and Michal and Abigail and Tamar are more like Melchizedek. Without father or mother or genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, he flits into the Bible story in Genesis 14 and then flits out again, stimulating the imagination of the biblical writer in Hebrews. The same thing happens to these women. We can read that as a way of treating them as disposable, as literary murder (Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 16-18). But we could also read it as turning them into people who (in literary terms) never die (cf Hebrews 7:3).

Wives

It is presumably no coincidence that sex and power first get systematically mixed up in Israel when power becomes an issue - when kingship is introduced. During Saul's story we hear nothing about Saul's own relationships with women except for discovering that his wife's name was Ahinoam. Her name appears among the names of Saul's sons, daughters, commander-in-chief, and male ancestors (1 Samuel 14:49-51). We do learn that Saul soon discovered what the daughters of a powerful man are for. He promises his elder daughter to David as an encouragement to David to serve him well in the army, and with the hope that he will get killed in the process (18:17). So a daughter 'belongs' to her father and can be 'given away' like any other piece of property, just as the traditional Marriage Service assumes. Much later the narrator also slips in the information that Saul had at least one other wife or concubine, Rizpah, who in due course pays a terrible price for being the mother of the king's sons (see 2 Samuel 21).

An element of double-or-quits is involved in Saul's investment. Giving David his eldest daughter might not turn out such a clever idea if it failed to lead David to his death, because it would increase David's status in the eyes of the people and encourage the idea that he was Saul's designated successor. Perhaps that was part of the reason why in the end Saul reneged on his promise. What Merab thought before or after is unrecorded, nor whether she preferred Adriel the Meholathite (1 Samuel 18:19). But later she pays the same terrible price for being the mother of Saul's grandchildren as Rizpah paid for being the mother of Saul's children (2 Samuel 21). (Or is it Michal who does that? There is an oddity in the text that we will consider in chapter 20, but if anything the uncleanness over which woman pays this price underlines the cost and the pain of it.)

We have noted that Merab's younger sister Michal was smitten by David, so Saul decided to use her in order to make another attempt at luring David to his death. We are never told that David loved her, or anyone else, as we have seen. We know she proved useful to him, being at least as good a liar as he was. You lie for the people you love. But he had no compunction about abandoning her like a bandit fleeing out of the window and over the rooftops when the sheriff's posse is coming in the front door of the whorehouse (19:11-17). And when he takes risks in order to see one of Saul's offspring, it is not Michal but Jonathan (ch. 20). The result was that Saul felt free to give Michal away to someone else who perhaps did love her - at least, he wept when he later lost her

(2 Samuel 3:16). There are indications from what we know of other middle-eastern societies that a woman had the right to be married to another man if her husband was captured in war or otherwise disappeared and did not reappear after a certain period. There are also indications that her first husband had the right to have her back if he reappeared. She was, after all, still his property. But presumably Saul's concern had been to get her into the possession of someone other than David for the same reason as he had denied her sister to David. She represented a potential claim to political legitimacy. And that is why David will want her back in due course.

Meanwhile David had married the beautiful and intelligent Abigail. One presumes it was for her money and her place in the society. He further cemented his relationship with the families of the Judean mountains by marrying another woman from there called Ahinoam who had the distinction of having the same name as Saul's wife. If this was the same Ahinoam, we would presumably have been told, and the timing looks wrong, but it is a nice coincidence. Perhaps David was content to let people infer that it was the same woman. Or perhaps the narrator is content for us to note the parallel, and see that there is the hint of a claim to succeed to everything that belongs to Saul, or of a cockiness on David's part. Saul has taken away Michal, so David will acquire someone with the same name as her mother.

He took Abigail and Ahinoam when he fled to Gath (1 Samuel 27:3) and when he moved back to Judah after Saul's death (2 Samuel 2:2). One wonders whether Michal heard about all that and reflected on the way she got left behind. There in Hebron he had time to father two sons by Ahinoam and Abigail, and four more sons by four other women (3:2-5). Only one of these women is said to be his wife, and the other three are presumably concubines, but anyway these women are mentioned only incidentally. Their significance is as the mothers of David's children. Seven years, four more wives, six sons: David's much-marriedness and his fruitfulness is a sign of his status and his strength. In Jerusalem he will acquire more unnamed wives and concubines and sons and daughters. A list of the names of eleven *sons* is provided (5:13-16). That makes the point even clearer.

I commented that David must surely have been changed by the murderous violence that he gets involved in. The same must be true of his marital experience. He gets involved in accumulating all those wives and concubines, and presumably relates to them in the way you do to the occupants of a harem. You go to bed with them once, and that is it. They then retire and live chaste, secluded lives, or go back to their father's house. They may fear what will happen when the king is no longer the king, for they know the kind of advice that someone like Ahithophel will give a new king, but meanwhile they are well provided for. It may look to us and it may seem to them that they have been used and that their life henceforth is rather pointless and it may seem boring. They will not have the opportunity to get properly married and to have a family, though they have each other's company and friendship. But what does David's marital experience do to David? If David did not have much clue about relating to women before, what chance has he of developing any clue when this is the culture that claims him?

The prevalence of these assumptions about sex and power emerges from a revealing comment about events in the northern half of Saul's kingdom while David is accumulating wives and concubines and sons. Saul's son Ishbaal accuses Abner, the commander-in-chief of Saul's army, of setting himself up as a successor to Saul by sleeping with Rizpah, Saul's concubine (3:7). If Saul's son Ishbaal wanted to establish his position as his father's successor, he ought to be doing that, but instead he is accusing Abner of doing so. The story does not quite clarify whether or not the accusation was true. From the perspective of an interest in how men see the significance of women, and given that we have already been told that David's side was winning the battle for control of the kingdom as a whole, the question matters little unless your name is Rizpah.

Ishbaal's accusation triggers Abner into changing sides, or gives him the excuse to do so. What David then wants as the evidence of his genuineness is not some concubine but the daughter of Saul who had given him his own link with the royal family. 'Don't think of coming to see me unless you bring Michal with you' is thus his response to Abner. So that is how Michal comes to be torn from the arms of the weeping Paltiel (3:12-17).

Michal's feelings are unmentioned. We saw in chapter 13 that she has her revenge, but it backfires on her. If a wife persists in her version of the interpretation of what goes on in their marriage, she will probably pay a price (even though the husband may well do so too).

The stories involving women in 2 Samuel are simultaneously 'stories of women as pawns in royal power struggles' and 'stories of women's love for men. These stories become a sort of commentary on Gen 3:16: "Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you" (Jobling, p. 160). Their love becomes a means of introducing and solidifying a political system based on domination and subordination, a system that will bring no good to them.

Lovers (2 Samuel 10-11)

Conflict has again erupted between Israel and Ammon. War is played in the summer, like cricket, because the winter rains make the pitch too soggy. So when spring comes, it is the time when kings go out to battle, and the Israelite army carries Israel's campaign against Ammon to its very capital at Rabbah, modern Amman (11:1). From the people's perspective, remember, the main point about having a king is to make sure that war is fought as efficiently as possible. But David has got into the habit of sending Joab off with the army.

This might be a sign that David has rewritten the king's job-description in a more profitable direction. While he accepted responsibility for justice and equity among the people, he left Joab in charge of military affairs as he left Jehoshaphat in charge of administration and Zadok in charge of religious affairs (8:15-18). His priorities were thereby nearer the ones Psalm 72 suggests for the king. The kind of job description that appears in this Psalm is an indication of the way in which Yahweh can take an arrangement such as kingship that was humanly devised and that Yahweh did not especially care for, and do something worthwhile with it.

The account of David's setting priorities for his reign comes at the end of another chapter of his killings. That itself follows directly on the account of Yahweh's breathtaking promises in 2 Samuel 7, with no sense of irony. Indeed his victories are perhaps the outworking of that promise. He defeats the Philistines again. He defeats the Moabites and kills many of them after determining in a particularly cold-blooded and chilling way who should live (8:2). He kills the king of Zobah and 22,000 men who come to support him and his army against David. He receives the hasty congratulations of the king of Hamath, who can see which side his bread is buttered. He kills 18,000 Edomites. Yes, Yahweh gives David victory wherever he goes. But then at the peak of his career he retires.

So David stays in Jerusalem doing more profitable things than fighting wars. Except that he only does that in the mornings. They would be long mornings, no doubt. When I did some archeology in Israel, we began at 6.00 (by which time the tennis-players on the courts next to the dig were already into their third set), had our second breakfast at 9.30, and finished at 1.30. After lunch the professionals carried on meditating on what we had found, while we minions read archeological books (well, actually I took the children to the beach). David has perhaps spent a hard morning receiving embassies and making just decisions and keeping an eye on the tent in which the covenant chest stood when it was not out with the army. He has had lunch and siesta.

In late afternoon the sun begins to give up the pretence that it is going to sear the city forever and commences its descent towards the Mediterranean. It starts casting a more golden and a less harsh light on the Mount of Olives and even on the brick houses of the little city of Jerusalem. Nowadays you can only build with stone in Jerusalem, but in 1000 BC it was more like a frontier town and the building regulations were less severe. And David gets up off his couch and strolls to the edge of the roof to lean on the wall and admire the view. No, David is not a view-admirer. He just walks across to take the air, and break the monotony, and wonder what they are doing across the Jordan in that battle with the Ammonites. If it were not for the Mount of Olives in the way, on an exceptionally clear day you would be able to see that far. He wonders why he allowed himself to be persuaded to give up being commander-in-chief of the army, because that is where he is most at home. He knows how to be a soldier. He does not really know how to do anything else.

We have noted that the Jerusalem of David's day stands on a rocky spur that slopes down until it tumbles into ravines. Until the temple was built, the palace was the building at the highest point of the spur, and therefore the highest building in the city. The arrangement speaks eloquently. The king lives above everyone, is over everyone, looks down on everyone, keeps an eye on everyone. So one afternoon David has had his afternoon nap on his roof, the middle-eastern equivalent of your garden or your patio, and afterwards he looks out over his city in that afternoon sunshine.

Years later the Book of Daniel will portray the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar doing that and admiring his city: 'Is not this magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?' (Daniel 4:30). Jerusalem is not Babylon, but David might have been forgiven a scaled-down version of such thoughts. If he indulged in them, his thoughts are interrupted. Down in the lower part of the city he can see a beautiful woman, also on her roof in the late afternoon, but she is having a bath.

Or is she? Portraits of Bathsheba sometimes portray her in a sexy pose exposing herself to David, who falls for it. The artists have the same male perspective as David, and perhaps a more prurient one. The story gives few details of what Bathsheba was doing, and the verb it uses could as easily be translated 'having a wash'. Indeed, that is what it means when applied by David to her husband in a line or two (11:8) and that is how it is translated with respect to David himself a page or two later (12:20). But then, translators might be less interested in the idea of David having a bath. Further, when one thinks about it, the idea that someone can bath on their roof (or anywhere else apart from a river) is somewhat implausible. How would they get enough water there?

The story implies that this was the kind of washing you did at the end of your period (11:4). That would also not require immersing yourself in a bath. It would be a washing operation that could be done with modesty. It was not done for hygienic reasons, though no doubt people washed for this reason, too. The Old Testament saw menstruation, like a man's emission of semen, as a rather scary business, maybe because of its linkage with bringing life into the world, and it was an experience that therefore had to be handled carefully, like childbirth and death and other experiences that linked with these. English translations talk about being 'unclean' through these experiences, but this may give something of the wrong impression. The Hebrew word is not a negative ('unclean'). It is as much a word which suggests something like being in touch with the supernatural. So washing was a way of giving symbolic recognition to the need to recognize the extraordinariness of this ordinary experience before you resumed ordinary life.

In later centuries washhouses that women could use at this time of the month were built into the basements of Jerusalem houses. Perhaps Bathsheba washes on

the roof because she can thus get away from the family to somewhere private. There is no need to assume that she is out in the open. More likely she is in some structure that gives a person some privacy when they are having wash. But it will need some light, and so it will need a window opening. And the position of the palace means that nowhere is private.

Bathsheba is a beautiful woman, and David fancies her. Now one might say that this is just David being a man. We men are like that. That is what gives devastating significance to Jesus's comment that fancying a woman has the same moral significance as actually going to bed with her (Matthew 5:28). But usually men are not in a position to do anything about their fantasies. That is where David is different. He is the king, and this is really more a story about power than one about sex. That is made clear by the way the story unfolds. Only two or three verses concern the act of adultery. The vast bulk of the chapter concerns murder. Yes, the story may start from sex for physical pleasure and sex because you are bored, but it soon moves on from there. Indeed, it is noteworthy that it does not say that David lusted after Bathsheba, as the commentators do. It has even been argued that his interest in her was a power matter. She was the wife of an influential Hittite and therefore a useful addition to his entourage. David is like the manager of a top football team, buying yet another world-class goalkeeper because he happens to be available (or despite the fact that he is not really available). That would certainly fit with everything else we have been told about David and sex.

We have noted that David had already acquired six wives by the time he got to Jerusalem, and that it will not be surprising if he is as confused about sex as he is about violence. David saw, and fancied, and asked a question. Who is she? 'Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite'. What is the significance of that? Well, one thing about this woman is that she is married. David cannot simply add her to his harem. Beyond that, David knows Uriah as one of his crack troops (2 Samuel 23:39) and he therefore knows that Uriah is conveniently absent doing what kings were normally doing at this time of year. Is it significant also that the woman is merely the wife of a foreigner?

We learn nothing of the person Bathsheba was in her own being, in the way she saw herself or in the way her friends saw her or in the way God saw her. First she has been characterized from the perspective of the man who looked at her and now she is identified by the men she has belonged to - the father who owned her first, and the husband who owns her now. But that power situation is about to change again. 'David sent aides and he took her and she came to him and he slept with her ... and she went back home'. David sent and took and slept. She came and returned. There are three verbs with objects (two direct, one indirect). He sent aides, he took her, he slept with her. That is power. You snap your fingers and things happen, you have what you want or whom you want. There are two verbs of movement. She came, she returned home. You are at someone's beck and call. I say to my servant 'Come' and he comes, or 'Go' and he goes. You fancy a woman and you take her, with your staff obediently cooperating, like the staff of an American president or a British prince or king. There is as much of a hint that this involves rape on David's part as that it involves seduction on Bathsheba's (Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 174-76).

And that is the end of the affair. Except that it is not. 'The woman' has got pregnant. 'The woman': that is all she is (see 11:2, 3a, 5). 'David' and 'Uriah' are usually referred to by name in this chapter. Bathsheba is never named except the one time she has to be (11:3b). Indeed she is named only once more in the book. Even at the end of the chapter she is merely one who moves from being Uriah's woman to David's woman (11:26-27) (the usual Old Testament word for 'wife' is simply the ordinary word for 'woman'). And in the subsequent account of the rebuke of David for his act and of the consequences, there continues to be hardly any account of Bathsheba's viewpoint and of what all that happened meant to her. We are told nothing about whether getting pregnant

resulted from carelessness on David's part or carelessness on Bathsheba's, and certainly not about whether it was deliberate on Bathsheba's part; events will make clear that it is not deliberate on David's. We are implicitly told that there will be no doubt about the paternity - at least, no doubt that the child is not Uriah's. Bathsheba has just had her period. She was not pregnant when Uriah left. So what is she to do? And what is David to do?

Today, of course, David would be able to arrange a speedy abortion - indeed Bathsheba would have been able to take a morning-after pill. There were abortionists in more sophisticated parts of the ancient world, but maybe not in a frontier town like Jerusalem. David could have attempted to bribe Bathsheba to conceal the child's paternity, but that would mean there was always the danger of it emerging that there was a rogue royal son around in the city. He could have had Bathsheba disappear. Or he could have come clean with Uriah and tried to clean up the mess.

He sends word to the army that he wants to see Uriah, but it is not in order to come clean. It is in order to try to get Uriah to think that the child is his. David has to get Uriah into bed with Bathsheba as quickly as possible. But after the interview with David, whose purpose must have puzzled him, Uriah does not want to go home and relax. He wants to get back to the front. That is where he belongs. Is there an implication that this is where David belongs, too, not indulging himself on his roof and in his bedroom? The next day David gets him drunk, but Uriah still does not want to go home (though anyway, serious drinking is said not to be a recipe for successful sex).

During Uriah's two days in Jerusalem, David has had to do some careful thinking. The options we have considered above are still there, but David has set his mind against them. Once you have set your mind on a way of handling a situation, it is hard to go back and reconsider the options you have rejected. Instead you go for a more desperate possibility, a possibility that you would surely have repudiated in the cool light of day earlier in the story. You would not have been able to imagine yourself undertaking this move. This happens in that film *A Simple Tale*. As the story unfolds and the characters make one move after another as they try to make the money their own, they find themselves doing deeds they could not have imagined at the beginning, deeds whose potential they did not know they had within them. But one deed leads to another with a frightening inexorable logic. David will have Uriah killed. Three times in his first conversation with Uriah he had spoken of *shalom* (11:7), though not of Uriah's *shalom*, and now Uriah is to have no more.

It is this moment, rather than the sex act, that is the turning point in David's life, the moment that takes him from public triumph to personal disaster. It is perhaps time to consider the strange paradoxes of this man's character. Through the story of Saul's irrational hunt for his life he has behaved with extraordinary honour, declining to kill when it was to his immediate advantage, and he has continued to try to look after the remnants of Saul's family. He has brought the covenant chest to Jerusalem with great enthusiasm (too great for Michal) and raised the question whether it is time to build a worthy house for it. He has sat before Yahweh in awed openness to Yahweh's own intentions about building up his 'house'. How can this man be an adulterer and murderer two or three pages later?

A general and a specific answer occur to me. The general one is that many men find it quite possible to compartmentalize their lives and minds. Every year we hear stories about ministers involved in adultery and marital violence. Often they are people with effective ministries, preachers through whom people get converted, counsellors through whom people get healed, pastors of growing churches, writers of edifying books. Sometimes their illicit sexual activity involves the people they are ministering to. Sometimes they are the last people of whom you would have thought this would be true. They are people who pray and people whom God uses. But they are men living split lives. Their very

giftedness gives them the skill to rationalize their behaviour away ('it is right to punish her for the way she behaves', 'our marriage is dead - this does not count as adultery', 'showing love in this way really will be a healing experience for her'). The film *The Apostle* is a graphic and plausible story about a man torn between being a minister God uses and a womanizer who lashes out and kills someone.

Then there are some considerations that apply to David in particular. David has grown used to killing people, used to deceiving people, and used to treating women as things. He deserves some sympathy for all that, even if not to excuse him for his wickedness. Like many men in many societies, he lived in a context which encouraged him to express and develop his violence because men were required to do that in war, and the Goliath story has showed how David could do that with brio. Then Saul drove him into a life of deception. Like violence, deception can become a habit. Skill in using deception as an underdog (which the Old Testament implicitly accepts) can easily become skill in using deception when you are in a position of power (and anyway, Uriah is only a Hittite). And David has never had the chance to learn to relate to women. Women are not so much people as possessions and status symbols and wombs and means of gratification. That is what they stand for in a patriarchal society like Israel's, and what they have often stood for in ours.

And whatever are the pressures that your culture and your upbringing and the nature of your own personality put on you, they will be more pressing if you are put in a position of leadership. That position gives you more power to do the things that you might otherwise only dream of, more reason for hesitating to come clean when things go wrong, and more scope for reckoning that you have to take action to clean up the messes you get into. So we can see something of the way that David's position and his particular experience of life in his particular culture provide him with the pressures that issue both in his affair and in his attempts to handle its consequences.

David once learned how to use deception as one of the few devices available to the victims of the powerful. He is now in a position to use deception in alliance with using his position of power. Uriah would have been wiser to go home and go in for a little deception himself, pretending to make love to Bathsheba. But perhaps he subconsciously recognized that once you compromise on truthfulness in one connection, in due course you will be doing so in another. The oppressed easily become oppressors when they come into a position of power.

David operates with a breathtaking cynicism. Uriah is the unwitting carrier of his own unwarranted death-sentence. He takes back to the commander-in-chief of the army the secret message that commissions his own death. The story perhaps implies that David's move also involves sacrificing the lives of some of the army's other best troops.

They are still involved in the siege of Rabbah, and besieging a city is always a tricky procedure. We have noted that people located their cities on defensible positions such as hills, so that an attacking army had to take considerable risk if it was to come within range of the defenders above them. It was safer just to sit there until the city ran out of water or food. But his king has commissioned Joab to find a way of putting Uriah into a dangerous position. It seems that this provokes a clash with some of the Ammonite troops, and that results in the death of a number of soldiers. Fortunately they include Uriah.

Joab rehearses an aide about how to break the news to David. He knows he has broken a cardinal rule of siege warfare and that David is too much of a military expert not to know that himself. But if the aide has the news that Uriah is dead, David will not be troubled. The aide perhaps has some worries of his own, for he embellishes the story, but the punchline is still the same. 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is also dead'. 'Oh, that's OK then', says David. Well, he only says that inside. Outside he says, 'Well, we must accept that

these things happen in war. You cannot always foresee how things will turn out. It is not a scientific procedure. Tell Joab not to be discouraged'.

'When the wife of Uriah the Hittite heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him' (11:26). She is still merely 'the wife of Uriah the Hittite', not a person in her own right. The point is underlined by the use of the technical word for 'husband' on this occasion. Usually Hebrew uses the ordinary word for 'man' to refer to a husband as it uses the ordinary word for 'woman' to refer to a wife, so that the marriage relationship is one between 'her man' and 'his woman'. The actual word for husband is one that in other contexts means 'lord and master'. It is the man who owned her who is dead. And we do not know with what depth of grief she mourned the passing of the master who was not the father of the child whom she could sense growing in her womb. Nor do we know whether she knew where this extraordinary turn in her own life was taking her, and what she would make of it.

We do know that the death of her master does not mean that she becomes free. 'When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house'. The verb more specifically suggests that he 'collected' her, like a parcel. She moves from the ownership of one man to that of another. It will be a very different life, but it will be more of the same.

16 The Man Who Lost a Son (2 Samuel 12)

So Bathsheba becomes David's wife (one among many, remember). And she bears their baby.

'But the thing that David had done displeased Yahweh'. We have noted before how these stories can sometimes leave God out of for long periods and tell the story at a purely human level. So far the story of David and Bathsheba has been like that. It has mirrored David's own stance. And sometimes events can unfold in a way that suggests that all they involve is human wills. But the Old Testament assumes that if God sometimes seems to have gone on standby, as this computer does, this does not mean God is not there noticing what is happening and or is not involved behind the scenes. After a while there is a whir and a buzz and the reality you thought you could forget suddenly makes a presence felt.

In the traditional Hebrew text that statement about Yahweh being displeased is a devastating footnote to 2 Samuel 11. The NRSV takes it as the introduction to chapter 12. Yahweh knows what is going on and tells Nathan.

So we assume. Admittedly there is nothing to stop us inferring that someone such as Joab was appalled by what David had done and got word back to Nathan, so that this is then God's means of intervening in the situation. But John Wimber used to tell a story about walking down the aisle of a plane and seeing the word 'adultery' written on the forehead of one of the passengers. God's revealing to him that the man was having an affair was the means whereby God was able to intervene in the man's life. Here, perhaps God similarly gives Nathan an intuition about what has been happening on the roof in Jerusalem and below the walls at Rabbah. God sends Nathan to see David. Through the previous episode David has done the sending (11:3 etc). Now God takes over the verb.

In an essay I have just marked, a student asked the sharp question, 'Why did Yahweh confront David in this way?' After all, many people get involved in wrongdoing like David's, and God does not confront them. The answer I wrote in the margin of the essay was 'because David was a man after God's own heart' - in the real meaning of the expression (see chapter 7). It is because David is

Yahweh's chosen servant that he does not get away with acts that other people get away with.

The Prophet Who Confronts

To put it another way, the reason you have prophets is so that they can confront people who hold institutional power. They are the means by which God gets a word in edgeways when people in official positions are inhibited by their position from knowing what God is saying. Thus in churches the people who prophesy are not the paid clergy. If they start prophesying, this can just become another way in which the same old people exercise power. Prophecy is the means by which God gets a word in edgeways through ordinary people in the congregation, people who do not need to protect their position. It fits with this that in Israel prophecy in the grand sense was approximately coterminous with the monarchy. The first great prophet was Samuel. The last prophets whom we can date (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) belong to the period when the monarchy had recently gone into suspended animation.

No prophets were involved in the story of David's being made king in 2 Samuel 2 and 5 (though Samuel had of course been involved in his original designation). The role of prophets in relation to kings has changed, in a way already announced in the story of David, Nathan, and the idea of building Yahweh a house. A main focus of the prophets' work henceforth is to confront the nation's leadership, and that is Nathan's task here.

How is he to do it? Quite understandably, a number of Israelite kings thought it wise to silence prophets by imprisonment at best or death at worst, and Nathan might worry about the 'How' because he can envisage that scenario. He will also have needed to be concerned about another 'How'. How can he get through to David? His cultural context, his personal experience, and now his institutional position have inured David to treating both men and women as if they are at his disposal, to take or to kill. He can do what he likes with them. How can Nathan break through that assumption? The task resembles the task that David's troops had at Rabbah. When you are trying to capture a strong city, direct confrontation is unlikely to work. When they were besieging Jebus, David himself had shown how you need something more indirect, more surprising. You have to find a way of catching people unawares, off their guard.

Nathan tells David a story. There were two men in a certain city, one rich, the other poor. The man with huge flocks had someone come to visit him and did not want to kill one of his lambs to provide a meal. So took the poor man's one lamb from him, and used that.

It is a clever story. It is not self-evidently an allegory. David cannot immediately see that it refers to the way he has treated Uriah and Bathsheba. Jesus's parables will thus resemble it - often their meaning, too, will not be immediately obvious. Parables work at a subconscious level. They give people the opportunity to respond before they realize what will be the cost of their response.

At the conscious level David cannot see the story's meaning. But the ferocity of his response perhaps indicates that inside he recognizes the implication. 'As Yahweh lives, the man who has done this deserves to die. He must restore the lamb fourfold for doing this and having no mercy'. The irony is, this is just the response a king ought to make. A king's job was to administer justice and equity. That may even have been the reason David stayed in Jerusalem. The trouble is that he has become the means of oppression rather than the people's protection from it.

'You are the man,' says Nathan. It is one of the great lines at one of the great moments in scripture. 'I anointed you as king', he says, speaking for Yahweh, 'I rescued you from Saul, I gave you Saul's household and his women, I

gave you Israel and Judah, and I would have given you much more if that was not enough. And all you have done is taken his life from this poor man and taken his woman to add to the ones you have already'.

As will often be the case with prophets in Israel's history, Nathan speaks like a judge in a court of law. In the more traditional forms of Israel's life, courts were not presided over by a single judge. Disputes in the community were determined by its senior members acting corporately. But one of the results of Israel's becoming a more urban and stratified society was that the legal system changed. As we have noted, David as king bears responsibility for justice in the community. There is therefore some irony in the way Nathan speaks like a judge. 'These are the facts of the case', he has said. What must now follow is a judgment that fits the crime. His 'now therefore' heralds the transition from indictment to sentence. The judge must be judged.

It is again typical of the Old Testament that the judgment involves an interweaving of God's personal action in deliberately bringing punishment, along with the 'natural' consequences emerging from the acts that David has undertaken. 'I will arouse... I will take... I will give... I will do...' says Yahweh. What will happen issues from the judge's sentence. It also issues like fruit from a seed. 'The sword will never depart from your house'. Those who live by the sword perish by the sword, we say, and the example David has set will produce terrible fruit within his own family. David's attitude to another man's wife will also have its terrible fruit in what happens to his wives. Bathsheba is by no means the first victim of David's attitude to women and neither will she be the last. David will find he has unwittingly encouraged other men to treat his wives as political small change as they make their affairs with them their signal that they claim David's throne. And in order for that design to be effective, these will be extremely public affairs, public humiliations of David without any concern about the public humiliations of the women. But the public humiliation of David at least corresponds inversely to his attempt to use his power to compel a woman to have an affair and then to kill her husband, and all without the community knowing.

It will eventually become clear, I suspect, that Nathan had not actually finished his revelation of God's coming judgment. There is a terrible final punishment that he has yet to announce. But perhaps David has heard enough and has to make some response while Nathan pauses for breath.

What response does one expect to the judge's frightening indictment and sentence? Is it horrified silence? Is it falling down and pleading for mercy? Is it the imprisonment or execution of the prophet?

It is none of those, but rather the two-word acknowledgment 'I-have-failed Yahweh', 'I-have-come-short-of Yahweh', 'I have missed the mark that Yahweh set for me.' By our conventions, it is extraordinary to reckon that two words would be sufficient response to the indictment and the threat that Nathan has laid out before David. But in a court of law, at crunch moments all the accused is required to do is declare 'guilty' or 'not guilty'. Simple acceptance of responsibility can be more impressive than long paragraphs that qualify the acknowledgment with explanations or pleas for mercy, and the judge may find expansive declarations of sorrow no more impressive than expansive protestations of innocence. The two words 'I-have-failed Yahweh' match the two words 'You [are] the-man'.

All that needs to follow the acknowledgment of guilt is the implementing of the sentence that has already been announced. But there is a delightful feature of the way in which the Old Testament portrays God as like a judge. This judge is always letting people off. The situation is almost the reverse of what happens in a human court. There a person who acknowledges guilt will therefore be punished, whereas a person who lies their way out may be acquitted. In relation to God, the person who thinks they are evading judgment eventually falls to it, but the person who submits to it may evade it.

The reason is that God relates to us in other ways than as judge. Being judge implies responsibility for protecting the rule of law and the vindication of standards of right and wrong, but being creator and protector and husband and refuge and lover and friend (to name just a few Old Testament images) implies a further set of commitments. When my friend does me wrong but acknowledges the fact, my instinct is to want to say 'That's OK'. I may not be able to forget, and I may be unwise to forget. There may be something here which I would be wise to remember in the future. But I do not need to punish my friend. So Nathan's response is immediate. 'Yes, Yahweh is making your failure go away,' the way that in other contexts Yahweh makes disaster go away. 'You need not die.' The death penalty will not be exacted.

But the response does not stop there. Indeed, I suspect that what follows is the final statement that Nathan knew he had to utter from the beginning. These words were always destined to be the coup de grace of the judge's declaration. 'Nevertheless, by this act you have treated Yahweh with utter contempt.' The traditional Hebrew text has David treating Yahweh's enemies with utter contempt - the translations then have him causing Yahweh's enemies to treat Yahweh with utter contempt. But the word never means that anywhere else. It seems likely that the traditional text is trying to take the edge off the ferocity of Nathan's comment.

The Son and the Mother Who Pay the Price

'And yes,' Nathan goes on, 'the son born to you is going to die.' To us this seems horrendous. Why punish a child for its father's wrongdoing? And what sense does it make for Yahweh to speak of making David's failure go away, if he is then to watch his son die?

The nearest I have to making sense of this is as follows. We read a declaration like that for its personal significance. We think of what it means to this child who is a human individual with his own right to live, and we think of what it means to this father to be told that his son is to die, and what it means to his mother. But the son we are talking about is not an ordinary child but the son of the king. In due course the son does die, and David and Bathsheba have another son, Solomon, who succeeds to David's throne. So the nameless child who dies is the son who might have succeeded to the throne. Of course David has other sons, but they seem not to count from this angle. The child stands for the fulfilment of Yahweh's promise to David as king, as Isaac stands for the fulfilment of the earlier version of this promise to Abraham. What Yahweh is threatening is that David will not lose his life, but that he may lose his destiny. It is a story similar to the first story of Saul's failing Yahweh. The relationship between Yahweh and David was supposed to be one of mutual honour. David has failed to honour Yahweh. Yahweh will cease to honour David.

So the son will pay the price for his place in the scheme of things. That commonly happens to children. It is part of the way God has created the world. It is the downside of the fact that in other circumstances children are enriched by their place in the scheme of things. That is what happened to Solomon, the replacement son. In the third world babies die because they live in the wrong country, when in the western world they would live. God created the world that way. Other worlds in which things did not work that way can be imagined. And God works with the world that way. This child dies because he has the misfortune to be the one through whom God's promise to David might have been fulfilled, and God intends to imperil that promise.

I am not thrilled with this account of what happens here, but it is the best I can do.

David's son gets ill. David pleads with God for mercy for his son. He prostrates himself on the ground before God, the posture of serious prayer in the Old Testament, the posture of a servant before a master, an underling before a superior. He stays in that position all night, and another day and night, and another day and night, refusing to leave when people pressed him to, refusing to eat. This continues for seven days. On the seventh the child dies.

David's experience of God is becoming more and more like Saul's and less and less like that of the heroes of old such as Abraham and Moses. Abraham prays for people who definitely deserve to die, for goodness' sake, and God grants his prayer. Lot has the chance to escape Sodom. Moses prays for the people who have made the golden calf image, for goodness' sake, and God grants his prayer and does not annihilate them. On the other hand, Amos will pray for Israel and then have God say that the time for mercy is over (Amos 7:1-9; 8:1-3). Hosea will put words of repentance and hope on Israel's lips and have God turn round and decline to listen to them, on the basis that they are only words (Hosea 5:15-6:6).

The relationship between Yahweh and David is like that between a father and a son (7:14). It is a commitment Yahweh never made to Saul. There was an upside and a downside to that. The upside was that Yahweh would never go back on a fatherly commitment to David. The relationship between a parent and a child is like that. Parenthood is forever. It is not a relationship that has a beginning and can have an end. Your children are always your children. Your parents are always your parents. Perhaps adoption proves the rule, and in more than one way. On the one hand, if you are going to give up a child to someone else, it is best to do it at birth, before you become attached to it. On the other, we know how much it can mean to someone to find their birth mother or the child they gave away. And on yet another hand, the commitment an adoptive parent takes on has all the permanence of a birth-relationship. Yahweh makes the commitment of an adoptive parent to David, a commitment that Yahweh will not be able to get out of.

The downside is that parents have traditionally been assumed to have the right to punish their children, as part of bringing them up and inculcating right ways in them. Yahweh also claims that right (7:14), and is here exercising it, as often happens in relation to Israel as a people.

A parent will no doubt sometimes relent of inflicting some punishment for a child's wrongdoing, and Yahweh acts in the same way. But the fact that a child throws itself on the floor and implores or shuts itself away and refuses to eat will not always move a parent (well, it may move a parent, but not necessarily to a change of mind). There are times when punishment needs to be inflicted. And this is such a moment for Yahweh.

His staff were afraid to tell David that his son had died, but he saw them in a huddle and guessed the news. Once again the story then surprises us. 'The authentic response to having your child killed ought to be one of uncompromising outrage - certainly not one of attempted adjustment to an awful occurrence' (Peter Koestenbaum in *Is There An Answer to Death* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976], p. 57). But instead of becoming even more distraught, David gets up and washes and dresses and goes to church (presumably to the regular services which went on every day) and goes home and asks for something to eat. His staff are again surprised. 'Well, there is no point weeping and fasting now, is there?' he explains. 'There was a point in it before. It might have prevailed on Yahweh. Yahweh might have been gracious to me.' David uses not the word 'commitment,' the long-term commitment that Yahweh promised (7:14), but the word 'grace', the word for an unpredictable and incalculable act of favour that someone will sometimes show. It was worth a shot at the possibility that his father might act like that, but it has not worked. So now there is no point carrying on asking. Death has intervened. It is the great irreversible. The traffic between life and death is one way. David will in due course follow

his son. His son will not return to this life. In the meantime, David must pick himself up and dust himself off and start all over again.

There has been no mention of Bathsheba through this story of her son's illness and death. She continues to be the victim, not only of David but also of the narrator and arguably of God. She has gone through pregnancy and birth and become a mother. She has then watched her son get ill and die for reasons that relate exclusively to the relationship between Yahweh and David and Yahweh and Israel. No one has asked what she was thinking and feeling through the story, and to the end the story focuses on the political questions that have dominated it throughout.

It is for their sake that we hear that David then consoled Bathsheba and went to bed with her. We do not know whether she was ready for this after what she has gone through. She conceives (David begets children at the drop of a hat - it is a sign of being a man). She bears another son (a daughter would not have done!). And Yahweh loved him, and gave Nathan a message for David. Although David had named his son Solomon, in Yahweh's eyes he was Beloved-of-Yahweh.

The story closes off by returning to Rabbah, where it began. The city's fall is imminent, and David needs to be there. So he gathers his people's army and leads them off to take the city.

Repentance Before God and Before Human Beings

The reader may have expected some reference to Psalm 51 at this point, and indeed other references elsewhere in this book to the Psalms as indicators of David's relationship with God. Maybe this is the point to comment on that.

The Psalms whose introductions make links with specific incidents in David's life have an odd characteristic. One can see in them ways in which they exactly fit the incident to which the heading links them. It would be entirely appropriate for David to plead for mercy in the way that Psalm 51 does, and to plead for God's spirit not to be withdrawn from him as king. On the other hand, the end of the Psalm presupposes that the walls of Jerusalem need building up and that then sacrifices will be able to be offered again, which does not sound like David's day. I am also troubled by the fact that the psalmist declares 'I have failed you *alone*'. In the story David has indeed despised Yahweh, but it seems inconceivable that Yahweh would have been pleased with David saying that he has sinned against no one but Yahweh. It would look suspiciously like an evasion of his responsibility for what he has done to Bathsheba and Uriah and the child. If the psalm had said 'I have failed you more than anyone else', or 'I have not only failed them, I have failed you', it would be fine. But it does not say that.

Even apart from this point, it seems impossible to hold together the opening of the psalm (the heading) and its reference to Jerusalem's walls in its conclusion. What people often therefore do is suggest that the conclusion is a later addition. But as I have noted, this question arises with other psalms. Their content partly matches the incident in David's life to which they refer, but only partly. And another approach to the question makes more sense. It is that the heading tells you not when the psalm was written, but when to read it. It is a lectionary note. A lectionary gives you two or three passages of scripture to read together, not because they all have the same origin or have identical concerns, but in the conviction that they overlap in their concerns and therefore that you will learn something by reading them alongside each other. Psalm 51 tells us some of the ways in which a person in David's kind of position ought to pray. 2 Samuel 11-12 tells us the sort of situation in which someone might pray Psalm 51. They thus illumine each other.

That is guesswork, but it fits the facts without altering the text. Its implication then is that if we want to understand what was actually going on in

the story in 2 Samuel, we need to read it on its own. We mustn't read Psalm 51 (or other psalms) into it.

17

The Man Whose Love Turned to Hate (2 Samuel 13)

It is difficult for us to read the story that follows as anything other than the story of Tamar. We then read it with deep grief and consuming anger. The grief and anger are directed not only at the man who wronged Tamar in the flesh but also at the one who has neglected her in the story. At least Tamar gets named, like Bathsheba. That is more than can be said for the women in Judges 11 and 19, Jephthah's daughter and the Levite's concubine. But like Bathsheba, Tamar may seem scandalously incidental to the story. It tells us more of her feelings than it does of Bathsheba's, but less of her fate. She is not in focus. This is a man's story, a story about kings and would-be kings.

The Sins of the Fathers

It is actually a particular man's story. That man is not Amnon, the one who directly wronged her, nor Absalom, the one who defended her. The story begins by describing the two key male participants as 'David's son Absalom' and 'David's son Amnon'. This is the continuation of the story of David, the man who fathered Tamar and who will now ignore her. And she has her horrifying moment in his story because her experience contributes to the outworking of his wrongdoing and (even more horrifyingly) to the achievement of Yahweh's purpose. The story that unfolds through the rest of David's lifetime describes the gradual maturing of the bitter fruit of that moment when David saw Bathsheba on the roof. Yahweh had put away David's failure and he did not die. But the death of Bathsheba's child was not the only price that he and other people would pay for the sequence of events that followed that moment on the roof. 'Later', this story begins (13:1). Quite a bit later, it soon transpires, because David has a small army of adult children. But their story emerges from those earlier events of which we have just read. They emerge from David's eldest son showing that he is the son of his father, except that he does it for love. They reflect both the divine promise and the divine displeasure.

Yes, the sins of parents are visited on their children. We do not like this Old Testament insight (see e.g. Lamentations 5:7) and prefer passages that seem to say the opposite (e.g. Ezekiel 18). We can then conclude that in the Old Testament people once thought that the parents' sins are visited on the children, but came to see that it is not so. If that were the case, the Old Testament would have given up one half-truth for another half-truth. Of course parents' sins are visited on their children, just like parents' blessings. We are shaped by our parents' characters, lives, actions, failures, strengths, and weaknesses.

This does not mean we can never become anything else. People do fail to realize the potential that lay in who their parents are and in what they could give them, and they do decline to be bound by what their parents are and by what they could give them. So a prophet such as Ezekiel urges Israel not to talk as if it has no opportunity for a new start. Every generation stands afresh before Yahweh, responsible for its destiny. But the way your parents have behaved and the models they have set before you and the balls they have set rolling determine the parameters within which you do that, and they make it easier or harder for you to walk the right way. His children will not be able to stand up

to the balls that David has set rolling (in the context of the balls that were already rolling in the society in which he lived). They will be bowled over by them.

There is not too much that is directly encouraging in the rest of the story of these men behaving badly. Perhaps you had better stop reading now. Perhaps I had better stop writing. In losing his throne and his life Saul may seem to have had a hard deal. I am beginning to wonder whether keeping his throne and his life meant that David had a harder deal. Death rescues Saul from living with the consequences of his mistakes. God's mercy means that David has to live with his. David's sins are greater than Saul's, but arguably the price he pays looks just as disproportionate. Many people get away with much more. Perhaps David, like Saul, pays the price for being king of a people who had rejected Yahweh as king.

So David has all these grown-up children. People who go in for critiquing the way modern society works often lament our focus on the nuclear family and our loss of the extended family, and contrast our way of being family with Israel's. There is a real contrast there, though I suspect we idealize and romanticize Israel's arrangement in the course of trying to come to terms with the mess we are in. We also falsify it. The average Israelite house was pretty small, of a size that would only really accommodate something of the size of a nuclear family. What was different in Israel was that other related nuclear families lived close nearby. The extended family did not all live in the same house, but they did live in the same street. Many of the pressures on modern marriages and families were thereby alleviated. The individual family's house was less of a pressure-cooker.

The same principles were at work in the royal family in Jerusalem, though they were differently expressed. David has all those first-order wives and second-order wives, and they now have all these grown-up children. Absalom has a house, Amnon has a house. The children of different wives were aware of special relationships with one another. Tamar was Absalom's full sister. They both had the same mother. Amnon was their half-brother. If we are to compare them with the dynamics of families in modern societies, we might think of the families of a second marriage, where the man and/or the woman have been divorced or their first partner has died.

The Power of Love

Amnon is David's eldest son and might seem the obvious person to succeed to the throne, though there are no precedents for that in Israel. Anyway, he falls in love with the beautiful Tamar. It is sometimes said that the notion of 'falling in love' is a modern one. Perhaps it is simply the case that the notion that falling in love has a logical link with marriage is a modern one. We have already seen that in Israel's world, as in most other cultures, marriage happened for quite different reasons than that. It happened for reasons such as the needs of politics or the needs of the community or a need for economic security, or if you were especially fortunate it happened because your parents perceived that you were a good match with someone. But the Song of Songs implies that people knew what 'falling in love' was. And the description of Amnon reads much like that modern experience. He was so smitten by Tamar that he made himself ill (13:2). He is overwhelmed by his feelings the way Saul was overwhelmed by his. There will be equivalent terrible consequences.

To judge from a later comment by Tamar, the fact that she was his half-sister need not have been a barrier to their marriage. Amnon perhaps presupposed the prohibition on such a marriage that appears in the Torah (e.g. Leviticus 18:9) but Tamar perhaps presupposes that kings have ways of getting round such taboos (Long, p. 27). David has not exactly looked bound by some other taboos. There

is indeed little indication that the Torah ever shaped Israel's life in practice. If it had done so, Bathsheba would be as dead as her baby and first husband by now, because the Torah prescribed the death penalty for a woman involved in adultery. It did not prescribe that for a man, but it did for someone involved in murder, so David would also be dead one way or another. Uriah was never in a position to test the adultery law in the courts, but Yahweh never comments on the matter either. Perhaps Yahweh is being merciful to Bathsheba as to David (12:13). If so, that shows that Yahweh, too, does not view the Torah as a kind of law code. Whether people may marry cousins or half-siblings, or even full siblings, is a matter over which societies have varied. The arguments relate not to genetics, as if such 'inter-breeding' were very likely to produce weak offspring, but to understandings of family order

So Tamar bids Amnon talk to their father, 'because he will not withhold me from you' (13:13). She indeed presupposes that your marriage is fixed by your parents - or rather, that it is fixed by your father. A man may be able to take an initiative in the matter, like Samson telling his parents that he has seen a woman he fancies: 'now get her for me as my wife' (Judges 14:2). If you are a woman, you accept that you have no rights in the matter. This is how the men have fixed it. If you are lucky, your mother may be involved, and you may hope that she has some insight into what may be best for you. But in the end, marriage is about you passing from the ownership of one man to that of another. Tamar voices no expectation of her mother being involved.

If Amnon was in love with his half-sister, then, he could have raised the question of marrying her. But Amnon is a man, and marriage is not what he is thinking about. He, too, knows that marriage is a business arrangement or a social structure, and these are not what is on his mind. It is not exactly that he is simply interested in sex. He wants to have a loving, romantic sexual relationship with Tamar, of the kind the Song of Songs describes ('Come with me, my sister'...!). But 'it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her' because 'she was a virgin'. So NRSV, though the meaning of that last word is notoriously tricky. It is often qualified by the phrase 'she had not "known" a man', so it seems that it did not mean 'virgin' in our sense but something more like 'an unattached young woman'. She might be expected to be a virgin, but the word does not directly indicate that.

Among other things, the word presumably indicates that Tamar was just a teenager. She was perhaps a very young teenager, given that girls were paired off by their parents when they were quite young. And at this stage Amnon's attitude looks very honourable. It would be wrong to take advantage of her. But he is tortured by his attraction to her. What could be wrong with their love?

Unfortunately he has an unscrupulous cousin who devises a rather obvious plan. Amnon feigns illness. His father comes to see him and Amnon persuades David to get Tamar to go and make him something to eat. When she brings it, he gets everyone else out of the house. He tells her of his feelings and tries to get her into bed. She will have none of it. He had said it was impossible to 'do' anything to her (13:2). She challenges him about that: such a thing is not 'done' in Israel. He must not 'do' something so 'stupid' (13:12). NRSV translates the last word 'vile' and in the next sentence translates a related word 'scoundrel'. Both translations convey something of the words' flavour. But the words are *nebalah* and *nabal*. Tamar is putting Amnon in the same category as Nabal, the previous husband of another of the women in David's extensive menage, at whose story one can imagine they often laughed.

In chapter 10 we noted that *nabal* meant 'stupid', but this did not mean Nabal had a low IQ. In the Old Testament, wisdom and stupidity are moral and religious categories. Wisdom means living in reverence for Yahweh and living in right relations with the community (see e.g. Proverbs 1:2-7). Yahweh has a vision for sexual relationships and communities have strong views about them,

and wisdom involves living in the light of these. Amnon is ignoring them. He does not seem to be interested in marriage, though neither is he merely interested in 'casual sex'. He loves Tamar, and like a modern man, see no harm in expressing that sexually. To infer from silence, Tamar does not love him, but she does not see that as an obstacle to their marrying. He might then have the opportunity to win her love. But two worlds are colliding here, as they often do in man-woman relationships. Tamar is from Venus and Amnon is from Mars. Tamar appreciates her place in her family and community and wants to continue to hold her head high there. Amnon is driven by his feelings and his physical desire.

Tamar's words are as confused as she is entitled to be while she is struggling to fend off Amnon's advances. 'Don't force me', she says, reasonably enough. In our culture we would reckon that 'I don't want to' ought to be enough to clinch the argument. A woman has a right to make decisions about who she makes love with, and 'I don't want to' is all she needs to say. No other argument ought to be needed. But Tamar lives in a less individualistic society, and she adds that 'such a thing is not done in Israel.' Her sexual identity and stance are not just an individualistic one. She is part of a community and wants to remain so. To go down this road is to end in 'shame', Tamar points out. It is another community word.

The powerful force that sex exercises over people can sometimes tear them apart at this point, and this is Amnon's problem. Movies from *Brief Encounter* to *The Bridges of Madison County* portray people wrestling with such a tension. Such movies portray a special relationship that could be the great love of two people's lives. It is also a form of relationship whose pursuing will involve them in abandoning the framework that has given meaning to the rest of their lives. In the story of Amnon and Tamar, it is the man who will throw caution to the winds and the woman who is aware of the loss that will come from forgetting what their community thinks. This may often be the way things are, but not invariably so.

The incoherence in Tamar's words lies in the fact that there ought to be no shame in having been forced into a relationship that you did not want, but her incoherence reflects the way things are. Men are often said to have a double standard in sexual matters, and something of the double standard appears here. Men can get away with sexual adventures. Women cannot. It is Amnon who will deserve the shame, but it will be Tamar whom it covers. She will never be able to hold her head high in the community. In our society, a person may be able to move to the next town and start again. You cannot do that in a traditional society like ancient Israel.

'But he would not listen to her. And being stronger than her, he overcame her and had sex with her'. The Song of Songs shows that the Bible is not averse to erotic writing. It provides page after page of enthusiastic recollection of a sexual relationship. There is none of that here. There is no love. There is no eros. There is (by implication) no joy. There is no mutuality, in which the Song of Songs specializes. There is only the old, old, story of a man using his physically greater strength to invade a woman.

The Love That Turned to Loathing

And then Amnon's so-called love for Tamar turned to loathing, a loathing that was 'even greater than the love he had felt for her' (13:15). NRSV calls it 'lust' not 'love', but Hebrew does have words it could have used for that feeling, and the translation obscures the link with the beginning of the story where we were told that Amnon fell in love with Tamar. Mere lust does not make you feel smitten, the way Amnon had felt smitten. But it is true that real love does not issue in rape.

I would like also to say that neither does real love turn to loathing, but I remember the adage that there is no greater fury than the fury of a love spurned. The adage applies the statement to a woman's love, but perhaps it can apply to a man's too. Either way it is a frightening fact because of the extraordinary energy in love that can then become an extraordinary energy of fury. Love can issue in huge creativity, hatred in huge destructiveness. Love can build strongholds, hatred demolish them. Love implies a massive vulnerability. Another person arouses in you an owning of incompleteness and need and an expression of self-offering. You risk expressing that. If it is spurned, you do not stay the same. You are now a person who is newly incomplete, needy, and rejected. It is not surprising if that experience issues in anger and loathing for the person who Amnon sees as having aroused all that.

Yet the loathing is described in a strikingly different way from the loving. Amnon was pictured as a victim of love, someone overwhelmed by torrential feelings that were bigger than he was (13:2). This is the modern myth of love. When the NRSV relates the turning of love into loathing, it describes it in parallel terms: 'he was seized with a very great loathing for her' (13:15). The translation makes one see him as once more the victim of gargantuan emotions that he could hardly resist. We cannot blame him for being overwhelmed by them.

Yes we can, because the Hebrew does not put it that way. It uses the same kind of active verb as it does at the very beginning of the story. Then 'Amnon loved her', to put it more literally (13:1). Now 'Amnon hated her with a very great hatred', to put it more literally. If the story is sympathetic with him for his love, it is not sympathetic with him for his loathing. He is responsible for it. Before the intervention of his cousin Jonadab, he was handling the consequences of his strong feelings for Tamar, even if not very creatively (but it is hard to be creative with unrequited love). He is even more responsible for handling his loathing.

The story of Cain and Abel relates how Cain perceives that God seems closer to Abel than God does to him. When he perceives that, it is the moment that 'sin lies crouching at the door' like a monster or a demon. He has to stand up to it. Amnon is in the same position. His rejection by Tamar brought sin crouching to his door. He let it in and forced himself on her. But Amnon's metaphorical house is one with many rooms leading to one another like a Russian doll, and sin is now crouching at a second door as he faces the question what he will do with his loathing.

Amnon's love turns to loathing not when it has been spurned but when its own energy has already been perverted into the violent invasion of its supposed object. One of the themes in the film *When Harry Met Sally* is the question how long a man stays with a woman when he has made love to her. After making love a woman wants to be held or wants to talk. A man's instinct (the film implies) is to want to get out of here. The film is talking about lovemaking by people who are not married, and I would like to think that marriage makes a difference. It would not be surprising if a difference in the other direction emerges if the sex has been rape.

I would like to think that Amnon is disgusted with the way that he has let himself be overcome by physical desire and has let that overwhelm anything that deserves to be called love. I would like to think that he loathes himself for raping Tamar. But we tend to have a hard time loathing ourselves. It is easier to turn someone else into the object of that loathing. It is Tamar who is to blame. First she aroused this love, then she spurned it, then she aroused that overwhelming physical desire. Of course Amnon does not work all that out rationally, any more than we do when we find ourselves transferring feelings in such a way. But sometimes when you think afterwards about why you behaved in an odd way, you can perceive the dynamics - or someone else can help you do so.

'Get out', he says to Tamar. It was a clever part of the arrangement that she had had to come to his house because of his feigning illness. It gives him

the opportunity to throw her out. 'No', she screams. 'You cannot just send me away after what you have done with me' (that verb 'do' again).

What does she want? Why should she want to stay there? To judge from what follows, does she imply that now it is all the more important that they discuss marriage? 'This wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me'. It is quite a statement. To have been raped is a terrible wrong. But in her society its aftermath is worse. In our society we would send in the medics and the counsellors and expect to be able to help the person to cope with the consequences of her experience. Tamar knows that this is not a mere physical assault that she can recover from, nor a mere emotional trauma that she can 'talk through' and 'come to terms with'. Indeed she does not think in those terms at all. The devastating implications of her experience lie in the area of her relationship with society.

We are familiar with the idea that when a woman gets raped, men at least are inclined to wonder whether she had asked for it. Commentators have assumed that about Bathsheba. We are certainly familiar with that old double standard whereby men may expect to have sexual experiences before they marry but will expect to marry someone who has never been with someone else. Once a woman has been with someone, she is second-hand goods (the property perspective continues to rule: a woman is the most expensive investment you will ever make). No man wants a second-hand woman.

Tamar knows that. She has been with a man. She no longer belongs in the house of her father. The man who put her into this position will not have her stay with him. There is no such thing in her society as a woman free to live alone, self-sufficient and independent.

But Amnon will not be persuaded. He calls his servant to throw her out and bolt the door. Tamar is wearing the dress that indicates the kind of woman she is, the king's unattached young daughter who one day will marry some eligible young man. It now indicates the kind of woman she was. She tears it the way you tear your clothes when someone dies, for someone has died. She smears her face with dirt the way you smear your face when someone dies, for someone has died. She buries her head in her hands the way you do when you cannot face the world or life. And she walks away from Amnon's house crying out (13:19). The story does not mean she was weeping, though perhaps she was doing that. It uses the word for 'crying out' at wrong and oppression and violence, the way the Israelites cried out in Egypt or the way Abel's blood once cried out to Yahweh when Cain welcomed sin in at the door. We have heard one or two such cries in this book, but maybe not as penetrating. These cries are gestures of weakness, but they are also gestures of public protest. Tamar's cry exposes Amnon to anyone who asks what is going on here.

The Cry That Was Heard

Perhaps Yahweh heard her. What follows could be read that way, but the story does not make the point explicit. Whereas it told us that David's acts in chapter 11 'displeased Yahweh' (11:27), it characteristically tells of the events that follow without such theological comment. In the entire story that stretches from chapter 13 to chapter 20 there will be only one direct statement about what God is doing or what God makes of events (see 17:14). The story implies that Yahweh's will is being worked out as David is living with the consequences of his wrongdoing, but it works by 'showing' not by 'telling'. David has been involved in sexual wrong and violence and these are now at work within his family. We noted at the beginning of this chapter that people such as Tamar and Amnon are ancillary to that story. The narrator is using Tamar, as Amnon did. But the story may also imply that events that work out to exact the price from David for his wrongdoing also indicate that Yahweh heard Tamar's cry.

At first it might not seem so. I have guessed that as an unattached teenager she had lived in David's palace in an apartment with her mother, but we are not told where she went with her distraught cry. The story takes her straight to a conversation with her brother Absalom, Amnon's younger half-brother. His response might seem one of breathtaking male ineptitude. 'Has Amnon your brother been with you?' It is a terrible euphemism. 'Quieten down, sister. He is your brother. Put this experience out of your mind.'

I have not emphasized what we see as the incestuous nature of Amnon's act because the story itself does not seem to emphasize it. It does view the intra-familial aspect to the business as important, but this is because all the people involved are David's children. The dynamics of the story are the dynamics that may be present when any man forces sex on a woman. While some of us men who behave badly do so with our sisters, most of us do so with other people's sisters, and I do not want to let us off the hook. But Absalom's response to Tamar is a response to incest. This is a family matter ('He is your brother'). We should keep it a family matter. We should keep it within the family. Don't make a noise about it outside.

Absalom follows that up with what our culture will see as some spectacularly useless male advice. 'Put this experience out of your mind'. Don't dwell on it. Don't talk about it. What you need to do it forget about it. Nowadays we believe in talking about things not repressing them, though we may exaggerate the usefulness of that.

Of course 'King David heard all about it'. I don't know why I say 'of course'. I guess it might have been possible to conceal it from him. He might have been so preoccupied with being king that he had no time to notice that one of his daughters had moved out, and that her mother was presumably pretty distraught, and that his daughter herself had lost all her outgoing liveliness and turned in on herself. But he got to know. And he got very angry. But he did nothing. The Qumran version of 2 Samuel and the Greek version make the reason explicit, and the NRSV includes their explanation: 'he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, because he was his firstborn'.

The Old Testament has a positive view of anger. It is a human emotion capable of generating action that puts things right when they are wrong. Saul's best moment was one when he got angry (1 Samuel 11:6). But anger that fails to issue in action is useless, aborted anger. What use is a king who gets angry but fails to do something on the basis of it? What use is a father who lets love for one child overcome what anger demands of another child? In the Old Testament, God consistently overrides the rights that society attached to the firstborn son, and God knows how to express anger. What use is a king who declines to follow God's pattern of behaviour? David's love for Amnon is as reprehensible in its way as Amnon's love for Tamar.

It seems as if the men in Tamar's life are all failing her. Amnon provokes her distraught cry, Absalom silences it, David ignores it. But there is a gap between Absalom's original inept response to Tamar and his subsequent action.

Perhaps the explanation lies in what follows. Tamar stays in Absalom's house, 'a desolate woman'. The implication is that she takes his advice, at least half of it. Desolation involves isolation and silence. Tamar does not make the matter a public issue and she does not spend every day wailing. She keeps it within the family and she never mentions it again. But the transformation of this lovely teenager into a broken and silent woman confronts Absalom over breakfast every day. And Absalom never speaks to Amnon again. He despises Amnon for raping his sister, with the same hateful loathing that Amnon had turned on Tamar after throwing her out of the bed he had forced her into. Unlike David's anger, but like Amnon's hatred, Absalom's hatred will not abort. It will issue in action. Tamar's silent cry has got through to Absalom. If his father will not do anything, Absalom will do what his father should do. It is a

fateful moment, one that sets Absalom on the path that will lead him to his death. He will take his father's place (Gunn, *David*, p. 90).

Two years pass and he duly takes action. We do not know why two whole years pass. It could hardly be that he needs two years to prepare the plot he now implements. The nature of hatred (or love) is to wane over time if there is nothing to feed it, but perhaps it was seeing Tamar's desolation at home every day that ensured that Absalom's hate deepened rather than waned.

Absalom has a sheep business a few miles north of Jerusalem, like the one in the south belonging to Nabal that David had inherited. After two years there is to be a sheep-shearing festival there. Absalom wanted to invite the entire (male) royal entourage – the king and his staff, and the king's sons. David made a polite excuse, as he once had regarding festive events at Saul's court. Perhaps he did not enjoy parties. Perhaps he thought they were a waste of time. He has only relaxed once in his life, and look where that got him. He was a man of action, and when he was not fighting wars, he did not know what to do with his time, like many a man when time comes for vacation.

Absalom presses him, to no avail. Once again themes from earlier in David's story are recurring. As David would once have been in trouble if he had prevailed over a Philistine king, so Absalom could hardly have implemented his plot if he had prevailed over David (though later events raise the question whether he already had bigger fish to fry).

On the other hand, he prevails when he presses David for permission to invite Amnon and all David's other sons. Why David needs pressing, we do not know. Absalom gives him no answer to the question why he is particularly keen for Amnon to be there. Perhaps Amnon as the eldest son represents the absent king. Or perhaps the implication is that David knew or half-knew what we know, that there is bad blood between his first son and his third son. If he knew, he bears some responsibility for what follows. Indeed, inevitably he bears some responsibility. If he did not know that these two men were not on speaking terms, he should have known. He certainly knows what Amnon had done to Absalom's sister, and he knows that he himself has done nothing about it. And his nephew Jonadab, he who inspired the original deed, knows that Absalom has been set on vengeance for Tamar since the day of the rape (13:32).

The banquet starts, and the wine flows, and Absalom gives his staff their instructions. Absalom once again shows that he is the son of his father. He does not get the blood on his own hands. He gets someone else to do the work. Amnon is duly slain. The man whose love turned to rape and then to hate, David's eldest son who might have been expected to succeed to his throne, has paid his price.

We do not know what Tamar thought about that. It is not her story.

18

The Man Who Wanted to Be Another Replacement Brown-eyed Handsome Man (2 Samuel 13-18)

There was an odd feature about that sheep shearing festival and the killing and the aftermath. Why were *all* the king's sons there? Perhaps it was simply to allay the suspicions of Amnon and other people who knew of Absalom's hostility to Amnon, knew that Absalom had not spoken to his brother for those two whole years. Amnon himself would surely smell a rat if Absalom just wanted to get him on his own out onto Absalom's territory away from the palace and the city. But if that was all there was to it, why did *all* the king's sons flee when Absalom's men attacked Amnon? Why should they flee as if they were afraid for their own lives? And what made someone report back to David that Absalom had indeed killed *all* the king's sons, and what made David immediately believe it? What

made it a plausible message? The hint of an answer lies in the very fact that they are described not as Absalom's brothers or David's sons but as the king's sons. They are the potential successors to David's throne.

Yahweh has promised that David will be succeeded by one of his sons, and we have noted that Amnon, as the eldest, may seem the obvious candidate. But Yahweh did not say that David's firstborn must be his successor. Further, if people know the stories about Cain and Abel and Esau and Jacob and Joseph and his brothers (let alone if they have thought about David's relationship with his own brothers) they will know that Yahweh tends to invert such human assumptions. So it is an entirely open question which of the king's sons will succeed.

The king's sons will also know the story of how David actually succeeded to the throne and will know that this involved much bloodshed. They will know that they need to keep their eyes on their backs, not least for where their brothers are. It is a fine way to be family. Indeed, later events raise the question whether it was David's sixth sense, his capacity to recognize danger to his life and sidestep it, that told him not to go to Absalom's festival. If so, it was unfortunate for Amnon that David's sixth sense did not extend to safeguarding his son's life. Jonadab had been able to read the signs (13:32). But David had sent Jonadab's friend Amnon to his death (in 13:27 more literally David 'sent' Amnon and the other princes).

Putting Wrongs Right

If anyone suspected that Absalom had his eyes on the throne, however, his listening to Tamar's cry for justice and his killing of Amnon would also seem to have dealt these a fatal blow. When someone such as Amnon commits the kind of wrong that he does, then it is the king's responsibility to see that he is punished for it. We have been told that David's priority was administering justice and equity to all his people (8:15). This now seems an ironic observation. It does not seem to extend to his nearest and dearest. Admittedly that is where it is hardest, where you are personally involved. That will continue to be David's problem. He may know how to manage an empire, but he does not know how to manage a family.

The wrong that had been done to Tamar needed righting if equilibrium in the family and in the community was to be restored. But that needed doing by the means that the community itself honoured. A plot and a lynching do not count. They put the wrong right, but they also commit another wrong and thus perpetuate a cycle of wrong. Now the wrong done to Amnon has to be righted. Absalom knows that, and he therefore flees for his life, just as David had once fled from the anger of Saul. Like David, he takes refuge in foreign territory, in Geshur.

David has now lost two sons. He grieved for Amnon, his firstborn, whom he would never see again, but he also grieved for Absalom, whom he did not see for three years. As the time passed, it assuaged the former grief, but not the latter. We recall the way he pulled himself together after the death of Bathsheba's first baby. He did not do this after the departure of Absalom.

His commander-in-chief, Joab, knew that he was preoccupied by this latter grief, and Joab is Mr Fix-it. You want a city taken or an inconvenient Hittite disposed of or a king manipulated into doing what he wants to do but cannot bring himself to? Joab is your man. Joab procures the services of a 'wise woman' from Tekoa, down in the south beyond Hebron, where David had once had his centre of operations. Again familiar motifs in the story recur. The term used to describe this woman is different from that used to describe the medium at Endor who made it possible to turn Saul round when he was at the end of his resources, but she fulfils an analogous role. Joab gives her the outline of the script to read to David, but she needs to be a wise woman to know how to fill it out and deal with the supplementaries.

She dresses as if she is mourning, like David himself, and goes to tell David a story. In this respect she recalls not only the medium at Endor but also the prophet Nathan with his story that makes David declare a judgment that in reality applies to himself. But it is less obvious that the story is divinely inspired this time.

She is a widow (she says) and one of her sons had got into a fight with the other and killed him. She is hiding the killer, but the wider family is pressing her to give him up so that justice can be done and the executioner (the 'avenger of blood') can have his way. So for the sake of justice and that equilibrium in the community and the sense that community order has been buttressed, she will lose her one remaining son. So will her dead husband who will have no one to maintain his name and his place in Israel.

There is a real dilemma involved in the administration of justice, especially when murder has been committed. Wrong is done to the whole community. The structure of its life is twisted. Somehow it has to be put right. Killing someone else may not seem a good way to restore equilibrium, but doing nothing may not do so either, and nor may incarcerating someone for thirty years.

But David does not sense a dilemma here. It is obvious what to do. In his capacity as supreme court in the land, he declares that the family's wishes are to be denied. He pardons the woman's son.

Now comes David's second 'You are the man' moment. 'In giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again' (14:13). If that is your attitude to this fearful dilemma within my family, why do you not take the same attitude to the fearful dilemma within your own?

Actually she does not say that. What she says is, 'Why have you determined to do the kind of thing you have done against the people of God?' What does she mean? Presumably she means that the people have the same thought in their heads as Absalom has, or eventually will have. Absalom is marked out as David's successor. He has Moses' guts, as he has proved by his willingness to act on behalf of someone who has been wronged (compare Exodus 2). He has David's looks: 'in all Israel there was no one so admired for his looks as Absalom. From the sole of his foot to the top of his head there was no blemish on him' (14:25). There was not a scar, not a zit. He has Samson's hair: he used to cut it once a year when it had got a little heavy and it would weigh 200 royal shekels (14:26). He has David's fecundity: he has three sons and a beautiful daughter whose name was ... Tamar (14:27). (The guts of Moses, who had to flee for forty years because of his action? The looks of David, who lacks the wisdom to go with them? The hair of Samson? Say no more. The fecundity of David, who does not know how to manage his family?)

What the wise woman wants David to do is to let personal considerations and familial considerations be more important than questions about social order. Perhaps that is what a woman might be expected to do, for a woman is likely to care more about relationships and family than about abstract principles. She wants that for her own sake and for her fictional dead husband's sake and for her fictional remaining son's sake. She also wants it for the community's sake. Paradoxically, she is appealing on behalf of society's desire against society's desire. Society desires to have murder punished. Society desires to have Absalom king. Usually the first would have priority over the second, and David has colluded with that. The woman urges the opposite policy.

As it goes on, her argument sounds a very modern one as well as a woman's one. She appeals to considerations that affect each person individually as well as to the needs of this individual family and the feelings of this individual society. She does so poetically and a little obscurely. 'We die a death, like water spilled on the ground that cannot be gathered up' (14:13). When you think of executing someone, you need to imagine yourself in their place. You need to think about your own death and how you see that. You need to reflect on the

fact that this is their one life that you are terminating. You need to see the frightening finality of what you are doing. You need to see that this is not a deed that can be undone. You need to see that we are not just deciding to affirm an ethical principle. We are taking away a life, for goodness' sake. Is it worth it?

'God would not take away a life', she adds. It is a breathtaking assertion, given the Old Testament's portrait of God. Yahweh is always doing that. Yet let us slide over that piece of modern theology. With her worldly wisdom, from that principle and from her compelling questions about capital punishment that would be raised if her story were a true one, the woman herself slides into the case of Absalom. 'God would devise plans to prevent an outcast being banished from his presence'. So why don't you? Letting Absalom be cut off forever from his home and his society is a kind of living death, she implies.

She is half-right, but only half-right. Absalom's self-banishment, implicitly ratified by David, corresponds to Yahweh's own way of handling the Bible's first fratricide (Genesis 4). Cain was not executed and neither did God abandon him, but Cain was banished. A compromise was thus effected between the principles we have considered, the need for society to have order supported and the need to remember that even a murderer has only one life. That compromise was also at work in Absalom's case by Absalom's own action. He took action on Tamar's behalf and thereby righted a wrong and supported order in his own society, but he did so in a way that also compromised that order by taking the law into his own hands when the king failed to honour it. He has therefore paid a price. Joab wants the compromise abandoned. As his willingness to take Uriah out had demonstrated, he is not big on ethical principle. That is probably hard for a military man.

We know that David is an easy touch for a parable. As he had once yielded to Nathan, so he now yields to Joab. Absalom comes home. Except that he does not exactly come home. He returns to Jerusalem, but he has no contact with David for two full years. In that sense another version of a compromise is put into effect. It is good enough for Joab, though not for Absalom. Absalom no doubt takes the view that it is a bit rich David disciplining him when what Absalom has done is make up for David's failure. Since Joab had made it possible for him to return to Jerusalem, he tries to get Joab to intervene with David once more. An amusing incident follows. Initially Joab will not respond to Absalom's e-mails, so Absalom sets his barley field on fire. Not surprisingly, this attracts Joab's attention. Surprisingly, it wins his action, and Joab is once again able to prevail over David and make him take further action to undo the compromise. David and Absalom embrace.

The story further illustrates the kind of man Absalom is, but we also wonder why we are told about it and where this whole saga is leading. Like incidents in a film whose significance is not clear at the time, these are events whose far-reaching implications will emerge in due course.

The Man Who Wanted to Be King

More time passed (the opening of 15:1 is the same as that of 13:1), and the point of the last two chapters begins to become more explicit. Absalom is indeed the son of his father. We have seen he has his father's looks. He also has his father's uncanny ability to win people's affection. He wins their hearts, the narrator tells us (15:6). Given the associations of the word 'heart' in Hebrew, this does not merely mean that he won their affections. He won their minds and their commitment.

Well actually what the narrator tells us is that Absalom stole the people's hearts. Their minds and commitment belonged by right to David as king. I pictured the young David winning the hearts of the people by accident,

uncalculatingly. He was always surprised that people became so attached to him, though he learned how to use the fact. Absalom is a man with a plan.

There is nothing wrong in principle with having a plan for your life, for what you want to do. I have two friends who at different stages of their life talked about their hopes for their lives with me. I remember telling both that I was the wrong person to talk to. I have never had a plan for my life - well, until the past two years, when I formulated the hope that I might stay where I am and die in California. But perhaps staying where you are and dying does not count as a plan, and I am slightly worried that now I have this desire, God may decide something else is good for me, particularly now that I have put it down in words like that.

But on my way to this geriatric strategy I do not remember doing anything that was calculated to constitute a wise career move. Fortunately I am very happy with where serendipity has brought me. My two friends wanted to be more proactive about their lives and ministries than I have been. I urged them not to make career moves that involved doing things that they would not want to do anyway, and they did not. But they made wise career moves, and they both reached places they wanted to get to. Both reached positions of power and influence.

That is what Absalom wants to do. He wants to be David's successor, and there is nothing wrong with that desire. First he gets himself a chariot and horses and fifty men to run ahead of him. That might be a little worrying. He has the accoutrements of regality before he has the inner and outward qualities.

What are those inner and outward qualities? In the case of Israel's first two kings they were the bravery and the chutzpah and the commitment and the imagination required of a warrior. The ability to win a war was the first quality for a king. But please God, Israel's warmaking days are over for a while, and anyway David has delegated military responsibility to the aforementioned Joab. We have seen that David has changed the royal job-description. It now focuses on the administration of just judgment to the people (8:15).

'Just judgment' ('justice and equity' in the NRSV) is an interesting phrase. It is one that will become very familiar in the Prophets. The word NRSV renders 'justice' is actually a power word. It is related to the word for the 'judges' in the Book of Judges, who are more often going about acting decisively to bring their people deliverance from their enemies than exercising justice in a court. The word that NRSV renders 'equity' suggests having a concern for what is right for people in your community, for people with whom you are in relationship. When God delivers Israel and they do not deserve it, that constitutes God's acting with 'equity', because God is doing the right thing for this people with whom God has a special relationship.

So neither of these words means 'justice' or 'equity' in the sense in which we use them, with a stress on treating everyone the same. They denote a concern to do right for your people that expresses itself in decisive action on their behalf. That became David's priority, and it is a brilliant one. It is now one that Absalom associates himself with.

Seeing that just judgment is put into effect was more than one man could achieve, even a man with the energy that David once had. Exodus 18 tells a story about Moses being overwhelmed by this obligation not long after the Israelites left Egypt. That led to Moses appointing a whole corps of assistant judges who would deal with all but the hardest cases. Absalom is able to claim that David has no such system in place, or perhaps that the system has broken down under the pressures of urbanization. Regular disputes could be resolved in local communities, but people came to Jerusalem with the hard cases, and there were too many of them. And it seems that David has done nothing about it. Indeed what we are discovering is that David seems to have lost the will or the energy to do anything much about anything. Perhaps Absalom is not wrong to

think that someone around here needs to act like a king, because the king is not doing so.

So Absalom stations himself at the city gate where people arrived from the country with those hard cases. 'Shame that the system has broken down the way it has,' he tells them before they have the chance to get inside the city and find out whether he is right. 'I wish I were a judge in the land. Then I could hear cases like yours and see that just judgment was administered'.

Absalom takes up the language we have been discussing, the language that described the king's new role. But he does it with some subtlety. He does not say he wants to be king, but that he wants to be judge. Again we need to remember that this does not mean 'judge' in our sense. In Israel a judge is someone who acts decisively on behalf of people who have been wronged. That was what those judges in the Book of Judges did. But that was also the role that passed on from them to Samuel to Saul to David. So aspiring to be judge implies an aspiration to be king. But it does not do so in so many words. And despite the chariot he does not behave like someone with pretensions. When those people with their cases came to bow down to him, instead to he took them by the hand and hugged them (15:5). 'Oh, he is a nice young man, that Absalom. There are no pretensions to him. He treats you as if you are just as important a person as he is'. That is how he stole their hearts (15:6).

The story does not tell us that Absalom is working out a game plan, but it sure looks like it. When some more time has passed, he asks David's goodwill to go to worship in Hebron and thus fulfil a promise he had made when he was banished. 'Fine' says David, failing to smell a rat. Come on David, have you not heard about the way Absalom has been behaving in Jerusalem? What is wrong with your intelligence system? Are you so blinded by fatherly love? Don't you remember where you started off as king?

When you have a parliamentary or a presidential election, you have to go round the country stumping up support, but Absalom has no high-speed trains or choppers for such a campaign. It is therefore fortunate that he has been canny enough to sidestep this stage in his campaign by winning that support from people from all round the country when they came to Jerusalem. In Hebron he gathers these supporters, along with 200 innocent Jerusalemite leaders and David's own chief adviser, Ahithophel. The rally is a huge success and news gets back to Jerusalem.

David panics and makes a humiliating retreat from Jerusalem via the backdoor. Absalom is thus able to stroll into the empty city through the front door. He makes the move from being proclaimed king in Hebron to making Jerusalem his capital even more effortlessly than David had, its previous rulers making even less effort to retain it.

The Man Who Took Advice

As had happened when David had taken the city, Absalom now has to ask the question 'What shall I do now?' Ahithophel is there with the answer. It is twofold.

First, there are David's ten secondary wives whom he left behind to look after the palace. Have sex with them one by one, to show that they are yours now. Make sure everyone knows. Show people what you think of David. That will strengthen the hand of your supporters. It will make it absolutely clear what the situation is.

So they pitched a tent on the roof of the palace, the place from which David had set eye on Bathsheba. In connection with that story we noted that the palace overlooked the houses in the rest of the city. It was evidently also a place that could itself be public, because the story can tell us that Absalom thereby had sex with these women 'in the sight of all Israel', and in the

hearing, no doubt. We here nothing of their feelings. They are political pawns, as they were in their relationship with David.

Second, act quickly so that you can get David killed. Give me 12,000 men to pursue him, let us catch him quickly while he is weary and discouraged. The people around him will flee and we will have no trouble disposing of him. The people will soon transfer their allegiance to you, the coup will be over when the former king is disposed of, and there will be peace in the land.

Ahithophel is actually quite right. That strategy would work. To judge from the way they fled the city, it is easy to believe how confused and distracted David and his company are. In those days, when you asked Ahithophel for advice, it was as if you asked God (16:23), the way David did in the old days. You could be sure that you got advice that would work.

But David has also left behind another of his aides, Hushai, and he offers an alternative scenario. It is a lie, but it works. 'You know what David and his warriors are like'. (Well, we know what they were like in the old days, but we are not sure they are still like that.) 'They are in a rage, like a bear robbed of her cubs'. (If only they were, for such rage might have held onto Jerusalem instead of surrendering it like a baby letting someone take away a toy.) 'And you know that David is too sensible to stay with the rest of the troops. He knows how to survive pursuit. He did it for years.' (But has he forgotten? Has he lost his touch?) 'It will not be as easy as you say. We will not be able to do it without losing some men. And then morale will plummet, because everyone knows that David is at his best when he is fighting. They will see death and defeat staring them in the face. It will not work to try to do this as a small-scale operation. We have to go in with all guns blazing. We have to call up the whole people. And you have to go and lead them yourself. And we have to kill him and kill all the people with him, every one. We can do it.'

Absalom and his supporters cheered. This was fighting talk. Little did they know that their support reflected the fact that 'Yahweh had commanded that the good advice of Ahithophel should be defeated, so that Yahweh might bring disaster on Absalom' (17:14).

It is another of the story's very occasional pregnant theological comments. The French sociologist, professor of law, and amateur theologian, Jacques Ellul, once wrote a book called *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (they were gender-exclusive times, the 1970s). It is actually about the Books of Kings not Samuel, but at this point their theme is similar. They are about the way people who exercise leadership in the world (usually men, indeed) form their plans and formulate their policies and implement their decisions, and do so freely to fulfil the hopes that lie in their own minds. Leaders do this, yet all unawares they do so in such a way as simultaneously to further God's purposes without that being their intention.

People often speak of God's sovereignty in such a way as to suggest that everything that happens in the world is God's will. There is obviously a sense in which this is true. Presumably nothing happens without God permitting it. But the Old Testament implies a much more nuanced and differentiated understanding of the relationship between God's will and worldly events. There are things that happen purely because God says so and through God's saying so, such as the original creation of the world or the resurrection of Jesus. There are things that happen through God's taking hold of human beings and causing them to do things that are exactly what God wants, such as the ministry of Ezekiel or the pregnancy of Mary. There are things that happen because God lets matters unfold in their 'natural' way so that God may or may not be satisfied with the results, like much of the story we are reading. And there are moments when God 'commands' that this latter process works the right way.

This is such a moment. The rejection of Ahithophel's advice comes about by a 'command' of God (to whom?) like the commands in Genesis 1 or the announcements to Mary in Luke 1:26-38. God does not usually act in this story in that way.

This is not a universal paradigm for understanding God's sovereignty. It is more like a mid-course correction that ensures that the trajectory that events follow takes the right direction at a moment when it could otherwise have gone off-course. As I write, the USA has just lost a zillion-dollar satellite round the other side of Mars because no one spotted that some of the companies involved in manufacturing its parts were using metric measurements and some were using imperial (as the USA in general still does, rather surprisingly). It was impossible to do anything about it. God does not have to sit wringing hands because a situation is irretrievable (though that may make us think it odd that God does not intervene more often).

All this reflects a mystery about human decision-making. There are moments in our lives when we make decisions that we look back on with some puzzlement. Perhaps it was a good decision, but at the time we could not have known all the reasons why this would turn out to be so. How mysterious that we made this decision! Perhaps God commanded it? At other times we made a bad decision, and wonder why, and need to ask whether God commanded it, and why God might have done so. At times politicians or generals make bad decisions, and we may wonder whether God is involved in the way it happened in Absalom's story.

So why did God want to bring disaster on Absalom? Because God favours David. We might be inclined to think that it might be because he should never have killed Amnon and never have sought to bring about a coup. We would like there to be a moral reason for events in these stories, but it is hard to make a case for that. There are killings and coups that God commissions. We have seen that Tamar deserves justice from Amnon and that David is behaving with an incompetence that suggests he may be in his dotage. Most important, if Israel's story is to be evaluated on a moral basis, David would have ceased being king long ago. Absalom is like Saul. He is no better and no worse than David. He is simply not David. David is Yahweh's chosen king. In a sense this is no privilege. We have seen that it does not make David a happy man. It is simply the way Yahweh is making things work out in trying unsuccessfully to make sense of Israel's history.

Absalom's mistake, like Saul's, is to want power when Yahweh has allocated it to someone else. Men do that, and God can use that instinct. But the instinct to hide among the baggage is the wiser one.

Hushai passes on the plan to the priests Zadok and Abiathar, who are also secretly loyal to David, and they send it via a servant girl to their two sons who are in hiding at En Rogel at the southeastern edge of the city. They get seen, but escape capture because another woman hides them in her well, and in due course they make an undercover journey down to the Jordan where David is encamped. He crosses the river and finds support and provision there.

Meanwhile 'when Ahithophel saw that his advice was not followed, he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order, and hanged himself. He died, and was buried in his father's house' (17:23).

Why? Was it because he had failed to carry conviction and get Absalom to do what needed doing? Was it because he knew that Absalom would now lose out in the conflict and that this would mean his own death when David returned? Was it because somehow his failure enables him to see that in joining the plotters he had not merely done the unwise thing but the wrong thing (though for a wise man like Ahithophel, that is a false antithesis)? If so, there is a strange sense in which his suicide, like Saul's, means that he dies a better death than he might, and a better death than the life he has recently lived. Whatever is the case, this note in the story functions in a similar way to the comment on Yahweh's involvement in frustrating his advice. It advertises for us the direction the story is heading, though we wait to discover how it will get there.

Hushai's advice means David has chance to draw breath and re-group his forces, though David does not know that. His intelligence tells him only of

Ahithophel's plan, not of its frustration (17:21-22). In due course the attempted coup becomes a civil war, and once more one Israelite army opposes another. David divides his forces into three groups, under Joab, his brother Abishai, and Ittai from Gath. They urge David not to take part in the campaign, on the grounds that this would play into Absalom's hands. His is the head Absalom wants. So David stays in the city, just as he had for Joab's fateful campaign against Ammon (11:1). With further irony, he is doing what Hushai had said he would do, except that this was what Hushai had said would happen if Absalom followed Ahithophel's advice. With yet more irony, the result is a death that he does not want, though perhaps he was again misguided in so regretting it when it happened.

The two armies face each other in wooded terrain. David's troops defeat Absalom's, and 20,000 men die, the forest claiming more than the sword.

And one of the lives it claims is Absalom's. The account of how this happens is obscure, like the account of David's capture of Jerusalem, but my picture is this. Absalom is riding pell-mell through the forest, and charges under an oak. Its branches hang too low for him to get under, and he has to grab them and let his mule go on. He is now in trouble. Irony strikes again, for what David's generals said about David is true of Absalom. In this battle David's forces are especially looking for him as his forces are looking especially for David. He does not know that he has the security of his father's instructions to take him, not kill him, though if he had this security, events will suggest he might have been unwise to trust it.

His only chance is to hide in the tree and hope no one sees him. But someone did. Fortunately for Absalom, this man indeed knew about David's command and would no more kill the king's son than David would kill Yahweh's anointed. Unfortunately for Absalom, the man told Joab, the man who arranged to have Uriah killed and the man whose barley-field Absalom set on fire. He has no such reservations and he is not the kind of man who forgets an expensive insult like that. The king is being sentimental. There is even less scope for sentimentality in civil war than in ordinary war. Joab thrusts three spears in the heart of Absalom, and ten of his staff then strike him some more. It cannot simply be a way of making sure he is dead. If it suggests the ferocity of human anger at what Absalom has done, perhaps we may include the fact that there is one thrust for each of the women he bedded to bolster his claim to kingship (Gunn and Fewell, p. 142).

The death of Absalom means that the battle is over, because it was 'only' a battle about who should be king. Joab's forces put the body in a great pit and raise a cairn of stones over it.

Absalom died without a son to perpetuate his name. It is a surprising comment because we have been told of his fecundity and of his having three sons, but perhaps they all died before their father. So Absalom had himself already erected a monument to his name in the King's Valley in Jerusalem. There is indeed still a monument called 'Absalom's Monument' in the Silwan Valley even now, though that dates from much later. But his monument is also this sad story.

19

The Man Who Lost His Grip (2 Samuel 15-20)

The Man Who Lost a City

In the story of Absalom's attempted coup there is one particularly puzzling moment. It is when news of Absalom's rally in Hebron reaches Jerusalem. The

puzzle is the way David panics. It seems to indicate that the man is falling apart. 'We must get out of Jerusalem or we are dead men'. 'If you say so', his staff respond. There is no arguing with him in his present mood. Or perhaps their immediate acquiescence is a sign that the whole administration is falling apart. Or there is the most worrying possibility of all, that David is simply right. He has quite lost the loyalty of the vast bulk of his people. He started off with 'his people', the people who had spent those years in the political wilderness with him, and then he won the people of Judah and the people of Ephraim. Now he is back to where he started, like many an exiled popular leader who has lost popular support when he had to cease being icon and had to deliver the goods to the people. Have David and his people been so busy building a future and a present for themselves that they have forfeited popular loyalty?

A strange entourage thus flees the city. The king and his household and 'his people' parade out of Jerusalem, though David leaves those ten secondary wives to look after the house. This will turn out to have been a bad idea. Abiathar and Zadok and the Levites offer to accompany him with the covenant chest, but David decides to leave them behind. He also commissions one of his staff, Hushai the Archite, to stay behind and pretend to transfer allegiance to Absalom so that he can pass on intelligence to Zadok and Abiathar. Their two sons Ahimaaz and Jonathan can then smuggle information to David.

Hushai fulfils his commission to go through the motions of transferring allegiance to Absalom, and does so with chilling theological brazenness: 'the one whom Yahweh and this people and all the Israelites have chosen, his will I be, and with him I will remain' (16:18). Perhaps he takes the view that this does not count as taking Yahweh's name in vain, as making wrong use of Yahweh's name. He is only echoing the claims that Absalom no doubt made, though it is noteworthy that we have had no claims from Absalom about the theological or moral grounds for his coup any more than we had them for his having Amnon killed. Hushai might claim to be acting for Yahweh's sake, even in the way he spoke of Yahweh. But to a modern Western mind he crosses a troublesome line between economy with the truth and lying.

At the city limits the not-very-presidential motorcade stops for David to review the procession that follows. This includes his staff, and also his crack troops the Cerethites and the Pelethites and the six hundred Gittites, the soldiers from Gath who have served with him since his days as a refugee in Philistia. Is it the case that Absalom has a much more impressive army than we have been told, or that this underlines the farcical nature of David's panic, or have they all got old?

They climb the Mount of Olives which towers to the east of the city and thus gives David his last view of it, which he fears might be his last ever view of it. David walks with his head covered and his feet bare as if in mourning, and weeps, and the people with him soon catch on and cover their heads and bare their feet.

Beyond the summit, as they begin the steady 4000-feet descent through the mountain wilderness to the Jordan, they meet Meribaal's PA, Ziba, with substantial provisions for them. Abigail was presumably there and must have rubbed her eyes because they recall the gift she had once bought to David to buy him off. There are 200 pitas and 100 bunches of raisins, but less wine because that is not really too good an idea as you trudge through the heat of the Jordan rift, and donkeys in place of sheep so that someone has something to ride. Meribaal is staying behind in Jerusalem because he thinks this is the moment when he can make his bid for the throne, Ziba explains. This may suggest either that he has something wrong with his head as well as with his legs, or that Ziba is lying, but David believes Ziba or goes in for double bluff and declares that he therefore deserves to have everything that David had given to Meribaal.

A little further David meets another relative of Saul's called Shimei, who prays for this to be God's punishment of David and hurls rocks at David and his staff in the sight of his warriors, shouting 'Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! Yahweh has turned onto you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned as king. Yahweh has given the kingship into the hand of your son Absalom' (16:7-8). It is a plausible theological assessment of the situation.

As these pathetic scenes unfold, David makes three comments that impress us. It is a strange fact. David has usually been a man of action, though he delivered a fine speech in connection with Yahweh's desire to build him a house. We have seen that his capacity to take action seems to have disappeared, or rather that he fails in words and in actions in relation to his family and that the action he is taking in fleeing Jerusalem with his army looks strangely over-the-top. But on that strange journey out of Jerusalem where his past parades before him, he discovers theology.

His first insight is expressed to Zadok, when he tells Zadok to leave the covenant chest in the city. 'If I find grace in Yahweh's eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and its resting-place. But if he says "I take no pleasure in you", here I am. He can do to me as he sees fit' (15:26). We have acknowledged our own instinct to want to make this whole story work on the basis of deserve, to see some fairness in Yahweh's treatment of the likes of Saul and David. Whatever is true about ordinary people's lives, David knows that deserve has not been the basis of his life. Its basis has been God's grace. It was not deserve that took him to the throne, nor was it deserve that kept him there. It was the fact that he was the man Yahweh chose. If he has any hope or any future now, it lies in that same grace.

His second insight is expressed in a prayer, when he discovers that Ahithophel is among the conspirators. 'Do befool Ahithophel's advice, Yahweh'. It is quite a prayer, because asking Ahithophel's advice is like asking God's advice. Ahithophel had a gift of wisdom, all right. Ahithophel indeed knew exactly what to do if Absalom was to turn his initial victory onto irreversible triumph. David had the wisdom not to ask that this time Ahithophel gives dud advice. That would indeed be a miracle. But every civil servant knows that there is never any guarantee that people will accept good advice, and David can ask for that lesser miracle.

The third insight emerges when Shimei calls down God's curses on David, and one of David's staff is inclined to take off his head. 'Leave him alone. He can curse, because Yahweh told him to. Perhaps Yahweh will look at my distress and Yahweh will "repay" me with good for his cursing today'. Shimei knows that terrible power can attach to curses, as enthralling power can attach to blessings. Abishai's instinct is therefore to try to subvert them by killing the man who uttered them. It looks too-late a gesture, like King Jehoiakim later burning the scroll containing the words Yahweh has uttered through Jeremiah. But like Jehoiakim, evidently Abishai reckons that they cannot simply sit by and do nothing. *Something* has to be done. David assumes that the relationship between human beings and human words and human acts and God and events is more nuanced and open and unpredictable than either Shimei or Abishai believe. And anyway, David has not wholly lost his touch. He is a man of trusting faith, but also a man of cunning strategy. It would be foolish to push Saul's supporters further into the arms of Absalom (Brueggemann).

When Your Son Dies (ii)

Yahweh indeed befools Ahithophel's advice and David proves that the great thing about our hopes in God is that their fulfilment is not too dependent on the depth of our conviction. Their fulfilment is dependent on the depth of God's

capacity to fulfil our hopes. 'Perhaps' is not much of a hope, but its fulfilment emerges from Yahweh's commitment to David, not David's commitment to Yahweh. Yahweh indeed repays David with good for Shimei's cursing. 'If I find grace' is not much of a hope either, but it more explicitly recognizes the point about our dependence on God. All the profound hope in the world will do us no good (except to make us feel better for a while) if it does not correspond to where Yahweh's grace lies. But we are not surprised that the David who leaves Jerusalem in humiliation returns as victor. Yahweh is attached to David. As Zadok's son Ahimaaz says, and David later echoes, Yahweh delivers David from the power of his enemies (18:19; 22:4). But his enemy is his son, and his deliverance involves his son's death.

Like so many aspects of the story of David and Absalom, when the news of David's son's death arrives, the account reminds us of something that has happened earlier. We have sat with David before as he waited and waited for news of his son when his son was threatened by death. On the previous occasion, too, the son was his potential successor. But there the similarity ends, and so does the similarity in the reaction.

Ahimaaz is excited that God has answered all their prayers, and he wants to be the man who carries the news to David. Joab will not have that. This is hard-headed Joab, Mr Fix-it who knows what is best for David even when David does not know it. This is the general who plunged three spears into Absalom's side in his anger at the arrogant young man's rebellion against the master to whom Joab is so committed (and remembering his personal grudge). But Joab also knows his master's heart. He knew that Absalom had to die, but he knows that David will not recognize this. He knows that this event is not one to be announced as if it were a triumph. He will send the news via a less impressive, foreign messenger, an Ethiopian. Ethiopians are of course world-class marathon runners.

Ahimaaz asks if at least he may follow, and Joab agrees to the pointless request. But Ahimaaz is a man possessed, and he knows a less taxing route. He is the first to reach the town where David sits awaiting news.

The town lookout announces that a runner is approaching, followed by another. They can tell the first is Ahimaaz. 'He is a good man', David comments. 'He is coming with good news'. Joab was right that David would draw the wrong inference from Ahimaaz's being the messenger.

'Everything is fine', he shouts out as he draws near to David, and he bows down before the king. 'Praise God. He has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king'. 'Is everything fine with Absalom?' David asks. 'I'm sorry, I don't know about that', Ahimaaz responds. It is a strange claim. Perhaps we must take it at its face value, and take it as an indication that the question uppermost in the mind of the average Israelite is different from the question uppermost in David's. Both priorities are understandable. Or perhaps it is a lie. Perhaps Ahimaaz lacks the courage actually to deliver the message that Joab knew was so dangerous. In the telling of the story, Ahimaaz's professed ignorance serves to highlight this difference of perspective and to heighten suspense. We continue to wait with David for the piece of news that seems to matter to him more than his throne and more than the destiny of his people. We are surely to assume that the kingdom would not be very safe in the hands of an Absalom, though we may feel it is not very safe in the hands of a David.

'Wait here, then', David tells Ahimaaz. His news hardly counts as news. The Ethiopian who was tipped for the gold eventually arrives and collects the silver. He repeats Ahimaaz's message. David responds with the same question about Absalom. 'May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up against you to do harm, be like that young man'.

David knows what that means. He is devastated. It is one of the relatively rare moments when we are told he had feelings. He is waiting there at the city

gate, and no doubt other people are there too, though we are given no description of that. David has to get out of that public place.

A city gate often incorporated a guard room over the gate, from which guards could keep an eye on what was going on in the bustle of the gate area itself where people gathered for business and talk. David runs across to the steps and climbs to this room so that he can break down into weeping aside from the eyes of other people. As he climbs the steps, people can hear him wailing 'My son, Absalom, my son, Absalom, I wish I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son' (18:33).

In a sense he has, because Absalom is David, the David of twenty years previously when he was inspired. It is his own death that David has heard announced. He has doubly died. The person who has been acting through this crisis is not the David of old. It is a David who has grown up theologically, and as a theologian I am prejudiced to the view that this is what counts. But it is a David who in his middle age has lost the decisiveness and bravado of his youth and not found maturity. The old David has died and no new David has been born. And now the old David who was reincarnated in his son has also died. David weeps for Absalom, but he weeps for himself, as we do when we grieve.

It is a strange thing about human experience how the same event can arouse quite opposite reactions in different people. When two people move house, one may drive off from the old house full of anticipation and enthusiasm in anticipation of a new future, the other may do so in tears at the loss of all that they treasure of the past there. When a son or a daughter get married, one of the parents may be more aware of rejoicing at this wondrous new stage in a life and at the freedom that this departure will bring for mother and father. The other may be more aware of the significance of this event for the inexorable passing of time and the loss of a role that has been central in mother's and father's life for a quarter of a century.

For the life of Israel, the victory of David's forces over Absalom's which involved the death of Absalom himself is a moment of great deliverance. It belongs in the line of extraordinary deliverances that has run through David's life, especially recalling the defeat of Saul. And David's reaction is similar to his reaction to the defeat and the death of Saul and Jonathan. But no one could complain on that occasion, for that was a moment when a foreign power defeated Israel. It was an unequivocally horrific event when the people was defeated and its leaders killed. In retrospect we wonder about David's reaction then. The Amalekite comes with news of the defeat of the army and the death of Israelite soldiers and the death of Saul and Jonathan in particular. David and his companions all fall into mourning and weeping and David's lament mourns over the fall of mighty warriors in this battle, but the warriors he mentions are Saul and Jonathan, especially Jonathan. It is the personal implications of the event that have got to David, especially the loss of the person who meant everything to him.

So it is once more when Absalom's forces are defeated and Absalom dies. It is the latter aspect to the day's events that gets to David, not as a moment of deliverance and triumph but as a moment of loss. It is indeed such a moment. He has lost his son. He is distraught. When people are in leadership in the secular world or in the people of God, it may be partly because they wish to serve their communities, but usually it is not only for this reason. It is because this is the way they can make their mark. This is the way they can exercise their gifts. This is the way they can exercise power. If David wins victories, it is to be himself. It is entirely consistent for him to focus at this moment on his personal feelings about Absalom, on his feelings as father rather than as king.

News of David's reaction reaches the troops and they suddenly see the matter the other way. We are not told whether they knew that David had given orders for Absalom not to be killed, but their reaction fits that. The army returned

to David's base and 'stole into the city that day as an army steals in who are ashamed when they flee in battle' (19:2). David is reacting as if they have lost, not won, and they begin to behave as if this is indeed so. They have failed with regard to the one specific thing that David asked.

Mr Fix-it is incensed. 'What right have you got to be behaving like this?' he asks. David has covered his own army in shame, the people who have saved his life today and saved the lives of his sons and daughters and his wives and 'concubines'. Joab is of course right. His army has done that. If Absalom had won, what would have followed for the people is general, not only for David and his family, does not bear thinking about. David is so concerned with loving the people who hate him that he is behaving as if he hates the people who love him. He is treating his staff as if they are nothing. If they were all dead and Absalom were alive, that would be fine with David, would it not? David had better get out and sweet-talk his troops. Has he forgotten what it is like to risk his life in battle and come back home, once the adrenaline has ceased flowing, and cry and wake up at night bathed in sweat, confronted in his nightmares by the spears of the enemy, and treading over the corpses of his friends? Does he not realize that the entire army will melt away if this is the attitude he shows to their loyalty and commitment and risk-taking on his behalf? Does he not see that his last state could soon be worse than his first? That he is actually bringing on himself the biggest crisis of his life, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory?

It is a fiery speech to make to a king. It works. David pulls himself together and takes his seat at the entrance to the city in the manner fit for a king welcoming a victorious army back home. And the troops parade before him, shame once again replaced by pride and sense of achievement.

You Can Never Go Back

The rest of the nation is in turmoil. Obviously the people who supported Absalom know that their hope for a new king is ended. But do they really want the old king back? Yes, he once delivered them from their enemies. Yes, he will go down in the history books as the king who finally disposed of the Philistines in a way that Samson could not, and Samuel could not, and Saul could not. Yet he fled because was scared of his son's pretensions to his throne. But Absalom, the young white hope is dead, and apparently David's other sons are wisely hiding among the baggage. Have the people any alternative but to try to get David to come back?

Meanwhile David is behaving with the resolute irresolution that has overcome him for the second half of his life. 'Once I was inspired, now I'm merely tired': Tim Rice's words fit Jesus Christ Superstar (not the real Jesus), and they fit David. Once he would either have asked Yahweh whether it was a good idea to enter Jerusalem, or simply done it with brio without asking. Now he asks Zadok and Abiathar and Amasa to fix it for him, promising Amasa the job of commander-in-chief in place of Joab, Absalom's killer. David did not wait to be asked to leave Jerusalem, but he waits to be invited back.

So the people of Judah make a pilgrimage down into the Jordan Rift to invite David once more to cross into the promised land, and he makes a mirror-image climb back to Jerusalem. In this reversing of the original journey, once again Shimei and other people identified with Saul meet David, with a very different look on their faces and very different words on their lips from the ones they had had before. Abishai wants Shimei executed, but as usual David is not in the business of executing personal enemies. Meribaal comes to swear that Ziba had slandered him in claiming that Meribaal had his own aspirations to David's throne, and David leaves him and Ziba to fight out their differences. Barzillai, the wealthy old landowner who had given David life-saving initial

support the other side of the Jordan, declines a place at court and asks for permission to see out his days in Gilead.

As a whole, however, the restoring of David is a Judean enterprise, and David is encouraging the development of a split between Judah and the other tribes that will exact a price a generation later when the country splits into two. Even now this miscalculation encourages a Benjaminite called Sheba to make a move on David's throne that wins substantial support in the northern tribes. Rather oddly, we are told at this point that the ten secondary wives whom David had left behind to his son's mercies he now declines to have anything to do with (20:3). This may sound harsh (or not), but may be a positive note in the story. What is David doing with 'concubines', anyway? These are the signs of being a middle-eastern monarch, but not the kind of signs of monarchy that Yahweh has encouraged in Israel. The implication may be that part of the antipathy of the Ephraimite tribes derives from a critique of the style of David's monarchy.

The putting down of Sheba's coup suggests some other critiques. David commissions Amasa to deal with Sheba but Amasa delays, presumably because he disagrees on the action. So David sends the ever-reliable but unfortunately predictable Joab. On the way to the fulfilment of this commission, Joab and Amasa meet and Joab kills Amasa as he had killed Absalom. Sheba takes refuge in the far northern town of Abel Beth-Maakah and ruthless Joab prepares if necessary to destroy it in order to deal with Sheba. One recalls footage of Vietnam or Yugoslavia. A wise woman calls from the ramparts. She reminds Joab of the city's honourable place in Israel's life. She speaks of peace and faithfulness and the vulnerability of Yahweh's heritage. 'I only want one man', Joab acknowledges. He had not thought of saying that before. It was easier to destroy a city.

At the end of this story (20:23-26) there is a summary of the administrative arrangements in Jerusalem that repeats and updates one that came near the beginning of David's reign (8:15-18). There are two significant differences. The first account began with David's accepting of responsibility for just judgment in the land. That is missing here. Absalom had seen that this was the key vocation of monarchy and had begun his campaign for the throne by projecting himself as a man who cared about peace and justice in the community. He had evidently been right that there was a vacuum of responsibility here. It seems that no one cares about the community.

Then this second account includes the post of someone in charge of forced labour. Israel gets things done the same way as Egypt did when the Israelites were there, by foreign workers forced to do Israel's hard work. These foreigners will be prisoners from David's many wars. So much for caring for foreigners because you remember what it is like to be a foreigner. We have come a long way in the growing up of David's state. It is just like the Egypt from which Israel once escaped.

20

The Man Whose Story Fell Apart (2 Samuel 21-24)

In a way that list of David's staff thus closes a bracket round the main account of his reign as king. All that remains is an ending, or a series of endings. They could be called a series of fragments, and their fragmentariness reflects the fragmentation of the man who is their focus. They form an odd and sad series, though maybe no more odd and sad and ambiguous than the connected story we have been reading. Except for his death, they do not necessarily belong

chronologically to the last days of his life, but they offer a closing perspective on his story. And if that story has not itself raised enough questions, they raise some more about it. Indeed, they may seem to make it deconstruct.

How Not to Remove Bloodguilt?

The closing scenes begin with a story about David and the people of Gibeon (2 Samuel 21). It is as unsavoury an episode as any we have read. It again recalls the story of Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 11.

There have been three years of catastrophic harvests in Israel, and people have nothing to eat. That runs quite counter to the way government is supposed to work. The idea of government is that the king sees that the country is ruled in a fair fashion, and God honours this by blessing king and people. Grain grows in abundance (see Psalm 72). When that does not work out, David rightly assumes that questions need to be asked. They might seem to need to be asked especially of him. We noted that the end of the previous chapter conspicuously omitted to claim that he had fulfilled his commitment to seeing that the country was ruled in a fair fashion (contrast 8:15-18).

If David has indeed failed in this, people will have lost their lives one way or another. That might have come about because the courts were maladministered and the innocent were found guilty. Or it might be that the judicial system worked quite legally but worked to favour the wealthy and (for instance) to deprive ordinary people of land. That, too, could eventually mean that they lost their lives as well as their livelihood. Either way there would be much blood on the king's hands.

David asks the question whether this famine is an act of divine chastisement, and discovers that there is indeed bloodguilt to be resolved, but it is a different form of bloodguilt from the one we might have expected. The bloodguilt is a hangover from Saul's day. Israel had promised that the Amorite inhabitants of Gibeon, in the central mountains north of Jerusalem, could live safely there in Israel (see Joshua 9). They had gained this promise by deception, but Joshua took the view that a promise is a promise. Saul apparently did not. Gibeon was, after all, in Saul's heartland. So he had tried to wipe them out, though he had evidently not succeeded.

The famine results from this guilt. It is yet another indication that David never escapes the shadow of Saul and his house. It is almost as if he could cope better with Saul when he was alive, one way or another. After his death, Saul and his house and his deeds keep haunting David. He has to live not only with the consequences of his own actions but with the consequences of his predecessor's. Leadership is like that.

There is a further irony about David's having to face bloodguilt near the end of his story. David's hands have been full of blood all his life, but generally this has conveyed no guilt. Shedding blood in war incurs no such guilt. At their first meeting, Abigail twice remarks on the fact that Yahweh had preserved David from contracting bloodguilt by indulging his feelings on stupid Nabal (1 Samuel 25:26, 31). Typically, David then gains the death of the man he wants dead without having to lift a finger. Usually this comes about by someone else's incurring bloodguilt on his behalf, but on this occasion Nabal kindly cooperates by dropping dead without human intervention. Generally David keeps his hands clean. Uriah's death is of course the spectacular exception, though even then David is in several ways distanced from what happens. Joab sees that Uriah dies and the Ammonites do the actual deed.

For all this human foresight and divine providence through his life, bloodguilt still haunts David and gets him into trouble, and all because of Saul. David asks the Gibeonites how he can make compensation for Saul's

wrongdoing. The answer is that they do not want money and that they have no argument with Israel in general. Their argument is with Saul. They want seven of Saul's sons and they want to kill them before Yahweh to make up for the slaughter Saul undertook. And David grants their request.

This is not an act we can imagine on the part of the David of whom we have elsewhere read. Where is the consulting of Yahweh now, or even the decisiveness that would determine to finish off the Gibeonites for their moral and theological effrontery? David reminds us more of Saul himself with his willingness to kill Jonathan to fulfil his stupid vow, or Jephthah with his willingness to kill his daughter to fulfil his. On the other hand, nothing would suit David better than to have the excuse to dispose of seven of the sons of Saul....

Five of the men who die are actually the sons of Saul's daughter Merab and the luckless Adriel. This is odd, for the Gibeonites had asked for Saul's own sons. Admittedly 'sons' is often used in a loose sense in Hebrew to denote descendants, and it may be that there were not seven of Saul's sons who could be given over to the Gibeonites. Does it suit David not only to have the excuse to dispose of seven descendants of Saul but also to dispose of five sons of the woman who declined to be smitten by him the same way as everyone else was? In a curious way she ends up in the same situation as Michal, who both loved and despised him. She ends up childless. Indeed, the Hebrew text actually says that the five are Michal's sons (see the margin at 2 Samuel 21:8). The pre-modern explanation is that Michal brought them up: so the Aramaic translation of the Old Testament, the Targum. The modern explanation is that this is simply a textual error. The postmodern explanation is that it is some kind of Freudian slip (Jobling, pp. 183-4).

The other two men who die are the sons of Saul's concubine, Rizpah. She last appeared as (allegedly) required to have sex with Saul's commander-in-chief Abner. It was part of his campaign for recognition as Saul's successor. That was not the only price she paid for being Saul's wife, even his second-class wife. She has lost her husband, and much of her self-respect. She now loses her sons.

Rizpah, too, takes us back to Jephthah's daughter's story, for she determines somehow to do right by her sons, as the girls in that other story determine somehow to do right by Jephthah's daughter. The seven men had been impaled on the top of a mountain at Gibeon, and their bodies were to be left there without burial to be eaten by birds and animals. But all through the long hot summer Rizpah keeps vigil there and protects them. And David hears, and collects their remains, and the remains of Saul and Jonathan that the people of Jabesh Gilead had stolen from Beth Shean (in order to protect them from further dishonour, we have been told, after they were put on public display there). David sees that they get a proper burial in the land of Benjamin. The seven young men have come home, and so have Saul and Jonathan.

'After that, God listened to prayers for the land' (21:14). So God appears in the first and the last verse of this story, and we wonder what God was doing in between, and what God has been thinking, and why God now listened to prayers, and how God would have liked David to resolve the question of bloodguilt, and whether God liked Rizpah's action more than David's. And we do not know, and we wonder whether it is because David never asked.

How Not to Look Back?

There follow two more fragments about battles with the Philistines (21:15-22), and again these threaten to make David's story deconstruct. If David has one unequivocal achievement, it is in removing the Philistine threat. He gave the people military security. Except that here he is fighting Philistines again.

And they are in exactly the same position that they were in when David first appeared as a fighter. They are represented by huge warriors kitted out with monumental shields and spears. Back at the beginning David faced them with energy and enthusiasm. But now David gets tired (21:15). He is like a one-time Wimbledon champion who no longer makes the last sixteen. He has become a liability in battle. His men insist that he give up while he is still alive to tell the tale. The last war stories in these books that are full of war stories will be tales of the exploits of his tireless young men, not tales of tired David (23:8-37).

And one of the Philistine warriors in those stories is a man from Gath called Goliath (21:19). That sets us asking how this relates to the story of David's killing of Goliath. Again there are pre-modern, modern, and postmodern answers. The pre-modern one is that it was another man called Goliath, or that it was Goliath's brother (cf 1 Chronicles 20:5), or that Elhanan was another name for David. The modern one is that this is an example of the way stories get attached to great figures, and that God was happy to have the story told this way because it provides a true indication of the kind of man David was. The postmodern one is that focusing on the historical question makes us miss the irony in the story. It is another sign that David's story is deconstructing. At the end of his fighting life, there is again need to kill a man who looks just like one he killed at the beginning. But David cannot do it now. He is too tired. These warriors 'fell by the hands of David and his staff', the story tells us (21:22). But directly they fell by the hands of David's staff. David himself cannot do it now.

With yet more irony, there now follows David's testimony about Yahweh's relationship with him through his life (22:1-51). Our testimonies and our prayers and praises reveal the way we think of ourselves. In addressing God and in addressing other people, sometimes we know that we speak for effect. We may exaggerate in the way we speak to God ('My God, why have you forsaken me'). We are seeking to motivate God to act on our behalf by portraying our need as more desperate than would be justified in the cold light of day - though even then the words may be true insofar as they are a reflection of our despair. In the tradition in which I was brought up, testimonies often exaggerated in their portrayal of the degeneracy of (say) the fourteen-year-old before he was converted. The prophets sometimes portray the people praying the prayers they know they should pray, which are not the real prayers of their hearts. How is it with David's testimony?

The way we pray and the way we give our testimonies follow patterns, and Israel's prayers and praises and testimonies also had regular forms. One of their features was that they were less preoccupied by sin than we often are. They recognized that we all do wrong and that this affects our relationship with God, but they knew that God was a God of love. In relationships with God as with other human beings we should not regard the fact that things go wrong in the relationship as too big a deal. We can repent and God can forgive, and we can move on. They also did not view wrongdoing and broken relationship as the normal state of affairs in God's people. The normal state of affairs is that God loves you and is committed to you, and that God's people are committed to living a right life. And when you pray, one of the things you may do is appeal to your (relative) commitment to walking in God's ways as one of the factors that God should take into account in listening to your prayers and in staying committed to you.

We can see some of these features in David's testimony, or his psalm of thanksgiving, for that is what it is. It reappears in the Psalter as Psalm 18, a sign that it is not merely a once-for-all historical account of the way David spoke on this one occasion (like 23:1-7) but a prayer that anyone could use in appropriate circumstances. The question is, are these appropriate circumstances?

The testimony has three central features. First, the opening part gives Yahweh all the glory for the extraordinary tale of survival that we have read in the two Books of Samuel. Yahweh has indeed been David's rock and fortress and deliverer and stronghold and shield. Time after time David has escaped from perilous circumstances, and he confesses that it was Yahweh who made this possible. We might be tempted to think that this is all too supra-naturalist. The story has not very often described Yahweh reaching from on high and plucking David out of the net by a miracle. It has described David as working out his own salvation. But a further feature of David's testimony is that the last part goes on to acknowledge this. David was able to work out his salvation because God was at work in him. God trained his hands for war (22:35). David won because he fought. But he won because God made him a fighter.

In the midst of these two angles on why David had his marvellous capacity for survival is an account of the reason God made it possible. It is the third striking feature of his testimony. Initially David attributes it to the fact that Yahweh 'delighted in him' or 'had a purpose for him' (22:20). It is another way of saying that he was the man after God's heart. So why was that? 'Yahweh rewarded me according to my rightness', he goes on (22:21). Now Abraham had been treated as a person with 'rightness' or 'righteousness' (Genesis 15:6), and David might have in mind the same idea of 'rightness'. It is a relationship word. It indicates that there is a committed relationship between two parties that involves the one doing what is right by the other party. When God rescues Israel from messes it gets into, God is acting righteously or doing right by Israel. This does not necessarily mean that Israel is morally in the right. It simply means that God is keeping a commitment. If that were what David meant, it would make much sense. We have seen that David has no more been morally in the right than Israel often was, but Yahweh had promised to keep a commitment to David because of the way Yahweh wanted to use him. It was that relationship that generated God's acts of deliverance, not David's personal righteousness, which has been more obvious as the exception than as the rule.

If only David had meant that. But his testimony goes on both to astonish and to disappoint. 'God recompensed me in accordance with the cleanness of my hands,' he tells us (22:21). In other words, those hands were not covered in blood. I have kept Yahweh's ways. I have observed all God's standards. I was whole in my commitment to Yahweh. I kept myself from guilt (22:21-27). It is a breathtaking claim. It is as if the man has not read his own story. What can be going on here?

My best guess is as follows. At the end of chapter 16 I noted that a similar question arises about Psalm 51. That psalm suits David very well at a number of points, but at others ill fits him. He did not need to pray about Jerusalem's walls, and he could hardly say that he had sinned against Yahweh alone. In its central focus on repentance it matches his situation and in this respect suggests the kind of thing that someone in that situation should say to God. But it was not written by or for David personally for that situation. The lack of fit between the psalm and David is as instructive as the fit.

Perhaps something similar is true of Psalm 18. It was not written by or for David personally for this situation, but the way it focuses on the praise of Yahweh in the opening part and the closing part matches David well. We must not press the details; or rather, we must let the lack of fit also be instructive.

If you do not like that idea, you might like to think about two others. The end result in terms of the testimony's significance will not be very different. You can work out for yourself which of these various approaches is pre-modern, which is modern, and which is postmodern, and why you prefer one or the other. One is that we start from the emphasis on the relationship of the psalm to David's deliverance from Saul (22:1). This psalm would be a truer reflection on the first half of David's story, and perhaps that is the point. The pain of reading it at this point is than that what David could claim for the first part

of his life, for the time before he was king, he can no longer claim for the second half. Or perhaps it really does reflect David's mature perspective on his life as a whole. In which case it is a frightening testimony to the way we can deceive ourselves.

Similar issues are raised by 'The Last Words of David' which follow (23:1-7). David again recalls the way God exalted him as anointed, but he then turns into a prophet. He tells us words that Yahweh's spirit spoke by means of him, and he uses Hebrew's most supra-naturalist expression for that. Yahweh did not merely shape him so that he 'naturally' formulated true insights out of his own mind, in the way Yahweh shaped him so that he 'naturally' fought with such skill and courage. Yahweh did not even merely address words to him like a great king addressing a servant so that the servant can then repeat them to others, like Nathan in chapter 7. Yahweh put words directly onto David's lips, bypassing David's mind and using David's mouth as his instrument, in the way David once used his guitar (23:2).

If we might suspect that this is someone trying to add spurious authority to their words, we are wrong. What comes out of David's lips has the ring of true prophecy, of the kind that Nathan or Elijah or Amos might have uttered. 'One who rules over people rightly, one who rules in reverence for God, is like the light of morning when the sun rises, like a cloudless morning, gleaming like the rain like grass from the earth' (23:3-4). It is a dense and allusive piece of poetry, but it clearly expresses a vision for kingship that contrasts beautifully if fearfully with those prophetic warnings about kingship that Samuel uttered (1 Samuel 8). David goes on to declare the contrasting with the destiny of worthlessness and people who embody it. They are not like flourishing green grass but like weeds thrown into the fire. David's words recall once more that summary declaration of David's commitment to focusing on what was just and fair for the people, near the beginning of his reign (2 Samuel 8:15). From David's own lips come the criteria by which he invites us to evaluate his reign.

'Is not my house like this with God?' David goes on to ask (23:5). Well, is it, David? It depends what you mean. You go on to recall the fact that your position depends on a lasting covenant from God, and we may agree that your house is like that with God. Till the end of the independent life of Judah four centuries later, your house will rule there. Yes, that is the position your house is in. On the basis of that, Yahweh has indeed been seeing to your deliverance and to the fulfilment of your plans for the people. But you are not really asking us to evaluate your reign on the basis of that prophecy are you? Or are you offering us another worrying testimony to the way we can all deceive ourselves?

How Not to Bring Blessing on Your People

The book has one more frightening story to tell us. Yahweh again got angry with Israel. We are not told why.

Perhaps the narrator did not know. But Israelites knew that Yahweh did not get angry without reason, and on previous occasions when Yahweh got angry, there have indeed been reasons. That anger could be good news for Israel (cf 22:8, just now) even if it sometimes seemed out of proportion (cf 6:7). Perhaps we are to assume that behind chapter 24 there lies some indulgence in traditional religion or some of the social disorder that Judges describes, or both (see Judges 2:14, 20; 3:8; 10:7). If so, these are themselves an implicit critique of David. He is there to see that these patterns are not repeated in the people's life. That is how things were when there were no kings in Israel and people did what was right in their own eyes. The point about kings is to stop such patterns recurring. Perhaps David grants that the responsibility is

therefore his when he subsequently protests at the way Yahweh treats the whole people. He is the one Yahweh should be confronting.

As in Judges, the people find themselves under Yahweh's chastisement. Like the two references to battle with the Philistines, a story of being the victims of Yahweh's anger once again deconstructs the narrative we have read as a whole and deconstructs any account of how successful David's life has been. It is another indication that little has moved on since the period of the Judges.

And nothing has moved on since the story of the bringing of the covenant chest to Jerusalem, the last occasion when Yahweh got inexplicably angry. I wondered then whether David was at least the secondary reason for Yahweh's anger, whether David needed to learn that he could not control Yahweh and subordinate Israel's relationship with Yahweh to political needs. The same question arises here. No, nothing has moved on. And this time David is the means of expressing Yahweh's anger. This has some poetic justice if he has some responsibility for its causes. Once again Yahweh works through David. He gives David the idea of taking a national census. It is very different way for Yahweh to be angry from the ones we have read of in Judges. Bureaucratically, things have moved on. It is also a very different way for Yahweh to relate to David. Earlier in this story one cannot imagine Yahweh inciting David to do something of which Yahweh does not approve.

We are not told why David thought the census was a good idea or why it was actually a bad idea. Perhaps the census was a means of knowing what was the nation's military potential, and perhaps it thus suggested an expansionist, aggressive, militaristic attitude, or suggested reliance on human resources rather than on God. Or perhaps it was a means of levying taxes. A tax system will be presupposed by Solomon's story (1 Kings 4), and the administration cannot formulate budgets and assessments without knowing how many people are going to be contributing. Either way it symbolizes the increasing power of the state over the people as they fulfil their desire to be more like other nations. The questions raised are similar ones to the ones raised by the story of the covenant chest and why its being moved to Jerusalem might be a religious-looking act that was really subordinate to politics. But we are not told the reason for the census, any more than we are told why it might offend Yahweh, or why Yahweh was angry in the first place. The bare facts are the background to what happens in the story itself.

Joab knows it is a bad idea. Again we do not know how. The point about Joab's insight is again to underline David's stupidity. However Joab knew, he gets overruled. His army spends the best part of ten months undertaking the count, which reveals that there are 800,000 men of military age in Ephraim and 500,000 in Judah.

Then David comes to realize that he has done something very foolish (again, we are not told how), and he acknowledges it to Yahweh. Next morning his other official prophet, Gad, comes with Yahweh's response. There has to be chastisement for what has happened. It can take the form of three years of famine, or three months of defeat, or three days of plague. David chooses the last, and seventy thousand people die.

The ambiguity of the man emerges again in the context of his relationship with his ambiguous God. This is a man who can be stupid, but who knows how to repent. It is a man who knows that it is in the end safer to fall into God's hands than to fall into human hands. Even the hands of a God who gets inexplicably angry and inspires you to do stupid things (or fails to stop you doing stupid things) are compassionate hands (24:14). 'At his best, David fears God the most. He also trusts God the most' (Brueggemann).

David sees Yahweh's aide standing poised over Jerusalem and speaks out in protest, as he had responded with anger when Uzzah had dropped dead for touching the covenant chest. It is my sin, he says. Why punish them? Punish me and my father's house. It is a protest reminiscent of Moses' and Aaron's when Yahweh

declares the intention to destroy the entire people because of Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16:22), and of Moses' earlier prayer at Sinai (Exodus 32).

Like these prayers and protests, it prevails over Yahweh. Yet the way the story is told does not quite put it that way. Instead, first of all it tells us that Yahweh had a change of mind about bringing the calamity on the people of Jerusalem, and only then does it tell us of the prayer David prayed when he saw the aide who was to execute the calamity.

The relationship between Yahweh's act and David's reminds me as much of Yahweh and Noah as it does of Yahweh and Moses. Yahweh had been able to see nothing but wrongdoing in the world, and determined to destroy it. But Noah found grace in Yahweh's eyes (Genesis 6:8). 'Noah was a just and whole person', Genesis goes on to say, using the words David has used of himself (22:24-25). Is that the reason for Yahweh's exempting him from the calamity and making him the fountainhead of a new humanity? But the order of the statements does not imply that, and arguably Genesis could not then say that Noah found 'grace' in Yahweh's eyes, for grace implies a lack of deserve. If Noah had been just and blameless, he would have deserved to escape the calamity. Grace would not have been involved. On the other hand, neither does Genesis quite say that Noah's being just and whole simply resulted from Yahweh's grace finding him. It just sets the two statements next to each other. (It is a nice complication that anyway on the traditional critical view they come from two different sources, J and P, which the author has simply juxtaposed without resolving the theological question they raise.)

The author of 1 Samuel 24 has done something similar. Yahweh relented. David prayed. It is almost as if we are watching the event on split screens and keep rerunning the video to see which came first, but we cannot work it out. We ask what would be implied by other passages of scripture, and there are pointers in both directions. That story about Moses initially made me read this one as implying that David's prayer is the stimulus to Yahweh's action. But David has already pointed out that compassion dwells within Yahweh's own heart (24:14). Yahweh is not dependent on human beings for the stimulus to be merciful. The most powerful presentation of this point comes in Hosea 11 where we are admitted into the conversation that is going on within God's heart and hear God determining not to bring calamity, because God's inner nature is indeed compassion rather than some more aggressive man-like instinct. The incarnation and the cross are the ultimate evidence that compassion issues from the heart of Israel's God rather than being a response to human pleading. We did not get saved because we asked for it.

The sovereign compassion of God is not dependent on human pleading. But human pleading is a regular means whereby the sovereign compassion of God is released in the world. We cannot resolve this antinomy. The juxtaposition of the two statements about God's relenting and David's praying makes the point. But the placing of God's action before the human action (as in Genesis 6) means the first statement has the emphasis here. It stands alongside David's extraordinary confidence in the mercy of the God who had got angry and inspired his foolish act. It gives us grounds for continuing to live with trust as well as reverence before a God who in our own experience sometimes behaves in ways that suggest anger and a desire to mislead rather than love and providence.

There is comfort, too, in the way this second reference to Yahweh's having a change of heart pairs with the earlier one in these books. Then Yahweh's change of heart took Saul into calamity (see 1 Samuel 15). Here it takes people out of calamity. Back at the beginning, too, Yahweh had declared 'those who honour me I will honour and those who despise me will be belittled' (1 Samuel 2:30). Things have not always looked that way in the narrative we have since read, and the closing implicit acknowledgment that the ways of Yahweh cannot be so simply tied up in such unequivocal statements is again a comfort.

The place where David saw the divine aide was evidently at a high point above the city, a place still used for threshing corn by one of the Jebusites (who had evidently not been cleared out of Jerusalem). David buys the field from him and sets up an altar there. It will become the place where Solomon builds the temple for Yahweh. The temple will stand for a theology where everyone knows where they are and knows how God acts. It stands for a theology that is able to locate God and knows what to do in order to receive God's blessing. But its story goes back to an occasion that deconstructs such theologies and acknowledges that we never get the measure of God's mystery. Even in the context of sure conviction about God's loving mercy we are warned to live in the awareness that actually we cannot domesticate God. But even in the context of God's unexplained anger we are invited to live by faith in God's having a heart of mercy.

The Men Who Told David's Story Again

There are several Davids in the Bible story. There is the David of 1 and 2 Samuel with all his ambiguity, the David on whom we are focusing in this book. There is the David of 1 and 2 Kings, whose faithfulness to Yahweh rather than to the Baals makes him a standard against which later kings can be measured. There is the David of the Psalms, the John Wimber and the Henri Nouwen of the Old Testament. There is the David of 1 and 2 Chronicles, the Thomas Cranmer of the Old Testament, the man whose significance lay in the way he set up the worship of the Temple. There is the David of the Prophets, the one whose far-reaching promises from Yahweh constituted part of the guarantee of Yahweh's future commitment to Israel.

What is going on here? It seems that David was so important to Israel that his story needed repeated retelling in different connections. This will have reflected the real, epoch-making historical importance of this great king. If you wanted to talk about being human, or about faithfulness, or about spirituality, or about worship, or about hope, then you would do that by talking about David, if you could. You would start from some facet of David's real significance and paint a portrait that concentrated on that facet and brought out all its potential. Your aim would not be to take a photograph of the David such that the VCR would have caught, but to paint a portrait that emphasized the angle you were interested in, so that your portrait answered the questions that you needed to handle. Now one can sometimes put a series of photographs together and make one whole. You cannot do that with a series of portraits. In the same way, we cannot turn the many Davids of the Old Testament into one portrayal.

When 1 Chronicles 21 retells the story of David's census, it gives an eyebrow-raisingly different account of the reasons for the event as they appear in 2 Samuel. It tells us not that Yahweh incited David to take the census, but that an Adversary did so. Indeed, many of the English translations give an even more eyebrow-raising impression, because they tell us that "Satan" incited David.

That is misleading. The Hebrew word *satan* is an ordinary word that means an enemy. It has been used by the Philistines to describe David (1 Samuel 29:4) and by David to describe Joab and Abishai (2 Samuel 19:22). In two of the places where it refers to a supernatural adversary (Zechariah 3 and Job 1-2) it has 'the' on the front, which shows it is not the name of someone. 'The Adversary' is a member of Yahweh's staff who has the job of making sure that nothing gets fudged in the deliberations of heaven, that no one gets treated too leniently or is allowed to get away with anything. Admittedly the story of Job and the prophecy in Zechariah may indicate that he gets too enthusiastic about

his commission, in the questions he likes to raise and the pressures he likes to put on people, and 1 Chronicles 21 fits with this.

In due course, Jewish thinking comes to include a figure who embodies opposition to God, and it comes to use the word *satan* for this person, and the New Testament then takes over this way of thinking. We therefore have to be wary about reading it back into the Old Testament. But the underlying issues are actually similar. Earlier Old Testament thinking is concerned to safeguard the sovereignty of Yahweh, and it would not want to imply that there was any other being who had real power in the world. We have seen in stories such as that of Uzzah that the Old Testament would rather attribute strange acts to Yahweh than imply that Yahweh was not really in control of events. Later Old Testament thinking is concerned to safeguard the goodness of Yahweh and would rather compromise Yahweh's power than imply that Yahweh would do anything that looks morally questionable. Thus Chronicles' retelling of the story at this point arises out of the instinct that Christians also feel, that we would not want to suggest that God was irrationally angry with David, as the account of God's incitement of David in 2 Samuel could imply. Both 2 Samuel's theology and 1 Chronicles' theology thus safeguard one important theological point, while risking another. It is not surprising, then, that God wanted to have both in his book.

21

The Man Who Died Cold (1 Kings 1-2)

It has been said that the key to David's character is that he always knew how to manage his public life but never knew how to manage his private life (cf Gros Louis). The end of his life brings out something that has always been true, that this grid actually deconstructs. Public and private cannot be separated. That has been so on a sustained scale through the Absalom story, where calamity and death came to the nation as a whole as a result of the king's failure as a father. It is so in these closing scenes.

The Cold of Death

When I watch the film *Catch-22* there is a scene I always anticipate. Snowden, the radio-gunner, has been hit when their plane was strafed. Yossarian seeks to comfort him and reassure him and tell him that things will be OK. It is a lie of the kind that people tell the dying to avoid facing facts themselves. Eventually he lifts the injured man's shirt and we see the horrific injuries that signify his death sentence. It is a visually awful moment, but the moment that gets to me more is the way Snowden keeps saying 'I'm cold. I'm cold'.

Cold is a mark of death. The author of the novel *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller, also wrote a novel about David, *God Knows*, and it starts with David's being cold. The scene comes at the beginning of 1 Kings, for the last moments of David's life come there, not in 2 Samuel. It is an odd way to divide the books, though it makes sense because it treats David's death as the introduction to Solomon's reign. But another effect is to highlight the cold with which David's life ends. In earlier days David was never cold, but now he cannot get warm at all.

Jerusalem is high in the mountains and it is indeed cold in winter. They lit fires, no doubt to try to keep the old man warm. They piled bedclothes on him.

They found a lovely teenager called Abishag, from Shunem, to look after him. She slept with him, but only literally, to try to keep him warm. The cold of death hangs over David. David is impotent. It is a symbol of a wider impotence that has disabled him for much of the story we have been reading. He cannot take the action that needs taking when it involves acting decisively in relation to his own sons. And there is still desperate need for such action, for the country's sake. If he does not see to the succession, Israel may again fall into civil war.

What is to happen next? His first son, Amnon is dead. So it seems is his second son, Chileab, to judge from the fact that he is never mentioned except in the list of David's sons back in 2 Samuel 3. So is his third son, Absalom. The next in line is his fourth, Adonijah, who perceives that this is the moment to establish his claim (1 Kings 1:5-14). He is another handsome man, like Absalom. He is another man like Absalom and Amnon whom David had not known how to bring up, or had never had time to bring up. He had never been told off in his life. And he knows from Absalom what to do if you want to be king. He gets himself a chariot and horses and fifty men to run in front of him. And he begins to tout support in the power structures in Jerusalem. He wins the support of one of the leading priests, Abiathar, and of Joab, David's pragmatic Mr Fix-it who has always been prepared to make his own decisions and perhaps recognizes that David is now past it. But he does not gain the backing of Zadok or Benaiah the commander of the Cherethites and Pelethites or Nathan or Shimei or Rei or David's personal troops. It looks too narrow a power base.

Like Absalom he arranges a feast, not in Hebron but near Jerusalem. As happened with Absalom's feast, news reaches the court. Then David panicked and fled. This time David has ceased to be effectively in charge. Other people do get scared, but they are thereby galvanized into manipulating the old man to take the action that will save their lives. Nathan sets Bathsheba up to tell David what is going on. She is to point out that it is contrary to his undertaking that her son Solomon would be the next king. We have been told of no such undertaking. David himself is being set up in his senility (Gunn, *David*, pp. 105-6). He is about to go through the motions of determining who will be his successor, but actually Nathan is pulling his strings. Otherwise nothing will happen. We might also note that Bathsheba plays her last scene in the story the same way as she played her first, being manipulated by men.

In the midst of Bathsheba's conversation with David, Nathan will 'co-incidentally' arrive and confirm what she says. David agrees that he had indeed designated Solomon as his successor, like a harassed boss confirming an assistant's claims about decisions he took last week but has now forgotten (I know: I have done it). He commissions Nathan and the other leading priest, Zadok, to anoint Solomon and enthrone him in David's place. Intrigue has succeeded where above-board action (Absalom, Adonijah) failed. As Adonijah's feasting dies down, the participants hear the commotion from a little further up the hill at the Gihon spring. They are too late. Adonijah thought he could do what he liked, but he has discovered that other people could force his father's hand more effectively. Cold old David is simply the man they have to manipulate into taking the action he should have taken ages ago.

His final speech commissions Solomon to walk in Yahweh's ways and promises that Yahweh will fulfil his promise. It then tells him to make sure that he deals with Joab, to act loyally towards the sons of Barzillai, and to deal with Shimei. His last words thus speak of death and loyalty, which have been keynotes of his life. And then he sleeps with his ancestors in his own city, while the son to whom he had given the throne also sees to the death of the son to whom he had denied the throne (2:24-25). Yahweh had warned that the sword would never leave David's house and David had said that the sheep farmer who had stolen the poor man's one lamb should pay fourfold, and the fourth of David's sons has now died an unnatural death.

Why?

Heller closes *God Knows* with David saying 'I want my God back; and they send me a girl.'

There was a central turning point in David's story. It came just before Solomon's birth, as Yahweh confronted David after Uriah's death (12:7-9). That was the heart of Yahweh's case against David. It made it worse that David had had Uriah killed by Ammonites and that he had then taken married Uriah's widow while his body was still warm (Yahweh does not mention the act of adultery that led to all this). For all that Yahweh had done for him and with him and through him, David had despised Yahweh. Murder and the destiny of his own house and the use of women have been interwoven in David's life.

Regina Schwartz has commented (pp. 45-46) that 'the biblical story of the fortunes and misfortunes of King David's dynasty seems to have trouble keeping its agenda straight'. If it is concerned to tell the story of how Israel got rid of the Philistines and acquired monarchic statehood, why is it interwoven with disturbing sex scenes? 'Do the struggles for Israel's national definition have anything to do with these sexual scenes?' The systematic way in which the two sorts of events are interwoven suggests they must. 'Simply put, Israel is threatened from without and from within and in the very midst are acts of adultery, rape, and incest.' It is not merely that public and private are separate spheres that have impact on one another. One could then say 'that the private acts of David have public consequences, that David is torn between private desires and public duties, that David's private affections get in the way of his public role'. Rather, 'politics and sexuality are so deeply integrated as to be one'.

In the light of the story we have been reading, we may be puzzled by the way the Books of Kings hold up David as a model of what a king should be (e.g. 1 Kings 15:3). One might be tempted to think that the writers had not read 1 and 2 Samuel, like David himself, and like the Israeli politicians I mentioned in the Introduction. They might seem to have relied only on his press releases and his official obituary.

The difference between Samuel and Kings is explained by the different focus of the books. The issue that concerns the latter in evaluating the kings is whether they have been religiously faithful. What was their attitude to Canaanite religion? What did they do about the 'high places'? Apart from the possible question raised by Yahweh's anger just now (2 Samuel 24), in this respect David treads a faultless line. He is wholly faithful to Yahweh. The context where Kings enthuses over David makes clear that this is its criterion (see e.g. 1 Kings 11:1-8, 33; 14:8-9; 15:11-14). If Yahweh's original insight into David's heart did not refer to the realization that this boy had the courage to take on the Philistines, perhaps it referred to the fact that David would keep the faith.

Yet even when holding him up as a model of faithfulness in this connection, it does on one occasion add the qualification 'except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite' (1 Kings 15:5). Perhaps it thus implies the awareness that this act was not merely a wrong against Yahweh in the sense that it was an act of disobedience to Yahweh's rules for our life. It was something more personal than that. In bedding Bathsheba and killing Uriah, Yahweh protests, 'you have treated me with contempt' (12:14). Elsewhere in the Bible, religious faithfulness and sexual faithfulness are two sides of a coin. They are two expressions of who a people and an individual are and how they understand themselves.

Yahweh will see that politics and sex stay interwoven. The sword will never leave his house, and his wives will be used the same way as he has used Uriah's

wife, and all that will happen in public, not in the privacy to which David aspired.

It makes us uncomfortable to hear Yahweh speak so tough. Perhaps it helps us a little to recognize that Yahweh is not announcing the intent to intervene supernaturally to make things come about this way. There will be no need to do that. When people in leadership positions in society or church abuse women and use violence to get their way, they sow seeds that bear bitter fruit. But we must not hide from the fact that Yahweh affirms this aspect of the way the world had been created. It grieves Yahweh to see this fruit ripen, but it is part of the intended moral structure of the universe. Acts have consequences. If it were not so, it would be a different universe.

Of course David responded to Yahweh's threat with an admission of his failure. Yes, 'I have failed Yahweh' (12:13). And Nathan responds, 'Yes, Yahweh has put away your failure'. But that does not solve everything. 'You will not die': you will not pay the proper price for murder. Perhaps it would have been better if David had paid that price, and died a death like Aaron's or Moses' or even Saul's. For in making that declaration, Yahweh does not suggest that the warnings in that threat will be abrogated. And we have seen that they were not. They bore their terrible fruit in the breakdown of a man and a family and a society. David has made his once-for-all move from life under the blessing to life under the curse (Carlson). 'Like Adam, who was free till he ate the fruit, David was free till he sent for Bathsheba. Once that threshold has been crossed each enters the world of real suffering, the world of conflicting loyalties and self-division. We could say that they enter the real world' (Josipovici, p. 205).

Was there any other possibility? Perhaps the answer is that repentance involves not merely an admission of guilt but the making of amends and the taking of responsibility. When the Philistines recognized that they had despised Yahweh, they knew they needed to acknowledge this in some tangible way that made up for their affront. David says he is sorry, but he does nothing to make amends to Yahweh. The taking of responsibility includes giving up a wrong pattern of life, but the David story suggests it involves more than that. David never set about discovering how to act as a husband or a father, and for that he and his family and his people paid a spectacular price.

Changing is hard. Four centuries later, King Josiah, one of David's greatest successors, sought to bring about change in the society of his day. 2 Kings 22-23 focuses on the religious reforms whereby he sought once and for all to end the practices of traditional religion in Judah and insist on worship of Yahweh alone, in accordance with the requirements expressed in the Torah. Jeremiah also commends him as someone who concentrated on seeing that the poor and needy got their deserts, rather than indulging himself (22:13-17). But less than half a century after Josiah's day, Jerusalem had fallen to Babylon. Even Josiah failed to undo the effects of decades and centuries during which the opposite policies had been implemented. The failure of previous kings bore its fruit. That was a corporate experience that was equivalent to David's personal experience. Admitting that you have done wrong and saying you are sorry and finding forgiveness and determining not to do it again may not in themselves undo the effects of wrong actions.

There is another even more frightening possibility we need to consider. Yahweh had promised to establish the throne of David's kingdom 'forever' (7:13, 16). But what is the cash value of such a promise? Yahweh had promised that the priesthood of Eli's family would last 'forever' but then had a change of mind (1 Samuel 2:30). Yahweh's 'forever' is part of a mutual commitment.

Making Things Work for Good

While I have been writing these chapters, I have been going through a personal crisis that arose out of a bad decision I had made, one that could have affected the rest of my life and the lives of some other people in a negative way. In this context I found working with the stories of Saul and David simultaneously encouraging and worrying. It was encouraging because it stopped me feeling alone with my stupidity. Great men in the Bible did such things and God stayed involved with their stories. It was worrying because they paid such a terrible price for their bad decisions. I could not see how God made all things work together for good (Romans 8:28) for David.

One afternoon, a friend told me I must not finish this book until I could talk about how God brought redemption out of stories like Saul's and David's and mine. 'That's a prophetic word', she added, to make sure I took serious notice.

There are three insights I have on this question. I do not know whether they are enough, but they are keeping me going. The first is one that has been implicit from the Introduction. It is that our individual stories gain some of their meaning from their being part of a bigger story, part of the story of the purpose of God and the people of God.

In the 1950s, a man in his twenties called Jim Elliot went with four other people to Ecuador to try to bring the gospel to a particularly aggressive Indian tribe, the Aucas. The Aucas killed the five people. Jim Elliot's wife Elizabeth later wrote her husband's story, giving it the title *Shadow of the Almighty*. That was a bold gesture. Jim Elliot had surely proved that living in the shadow of the Almighty did not ensure your safety in the way that Psalm 91 promises. Yet there was something authentic about Elizabeth Elliot's statement of faith, and the fruitfulness of Jim Elliot's life and death over succeeding decades illustrates the way in which it might be OK to have made a decision that looks stupid. One's life is set in the context of a broader story.

As I have been trying to come to terms with my stupid decision, I have been talking through the issues it raised with a therapist (I do live in California now). He made me think about the process I went through when I decided to go ahead with my relationship with my wife Ann and our eventual marriage, despite the fact that she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He invited me to see that it was a 'bad' decision in the sense that I did not think through the implications very carefully and rationally. At one level it was scary to ask whether that decision that has decisively shaped my life was such a good idea, though in practice I found it less scary than it sounds.

Perhaps if I had been coldly rational I would not have married Ann. In that sense perhaps it was a bad decision. To use the terms I used in chapter 10, I made my own bad luck. I failed Napoleon's test. But it was a decision that God has taken hold of and worked with. If it had not been for the pressures that that decision has brought upon me, it is unlikely that I would have made this other recent bad decision. But the grimness of that is outweighed by the terrible fruitfulness over the years of that unwise, romantic, heroic, intuitive, ill-thought-through decision back in the 1960s. It has gained a place in a broader story that involves many other people who have been our friends and to whom God has ministered through Ann's illness.

The second insight is related. It is that for Saul and David and for us, it is never over until it is over. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the way Yahweh related to Saul, what Saul has to accept responsibility for is his handling of the way Yahweh relates to him. He fails to do that, at least until the last 24 hours of his life. In chapter 11 I asked whether Saul became a man in the last hours of his life, like Matthew Poncelot in *Dead Man Walking*. If it is possible to do that on your deathbed, it is possible to become a man or a woman at any other stage of our lives. That is possible at any moment, no matter what bad decision we have just made (or made long ago) or what tough hand from God we have just been dealt (or were dealt long ago).

The third insight emerges from trying to think of a way to close David's story positively. John Hercus does it in his book about David by going back to David composing Psalm 23. Apart from doubting whether David composed Psalm 23, I feel that that seems to be cheating. The biblical story itself closes with David on his cold deathbed. Before that, it almost closes with him giving a fine exhortation to Solomon to be strong and courageous and walk in Yahweh's ways. Ah, that would make a fine ending. But then it 'spoils it' by telling us that David adds those more specific instructions to make sure Solomon sees to the killing of a few people like Joab and Shimei. So David's very last words are words that commission bloodshed.

Like those Israeli politicians, theological students resist recognizing the portrait of David as he actually was, and one reason is that they have been taught by their churches and by their own hearts to believe in justification by works. God chooses people because they are faithful. It would be immoral, would it not, for God to choose and to use and to bless people who were not models of faithfulness?

The Bible turns upside-down this assumption, and pictures God choosing and using and even blessing a man like David. I have noted that David thus mirrors the nature of Israel itself, which God chose not because it was impressive or righteous but just because he chose it (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). It was a people after God's own heart, a people God set heart and mind on for reasons that came out of God and were not merely responses to the inherent attractiveness of the object. Mixed-up David, still characterized by contradiction on his deathbed, is the person after God's own heart. And so am I, characterized by mine. And so are you. So maybe you need not take this book back to the bookstore.

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